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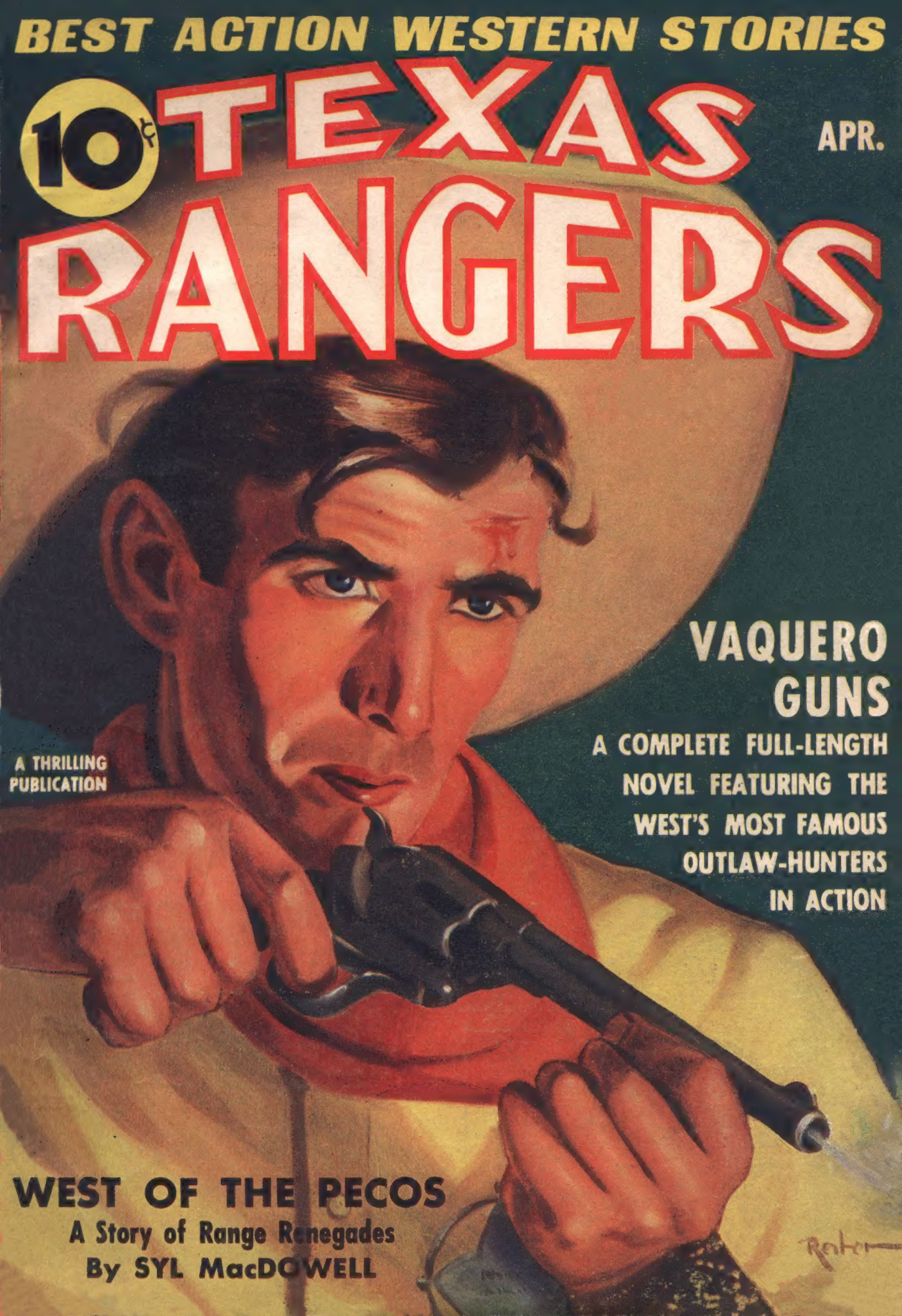

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A Story of Range Renegades

By SYL MacDOWELL

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We make **to measure,** to fit you **individually**—BY MAIL the World's No. 1 FIT-RITE Dental Plates for men and women —from an impression of your mouth. We have **thousands of enthusiastic, satisfied customers** all over the country wearing high-grade teeth we made by mail at sensible prices.

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QUIT wearing teeth that clack; that constantly slip off your gums; that broadcast their glaring falseness to the world every time you open your mouth. Life is too short, health too precious looks are too important! For looks, health and comfort—PREFER FIT-RITE FALSE TEETH!

Our dentures are set with **life-like, pearly-white, genuine, porcelain teeth;** constructed from finest materials, with expert workmanship, to give **life-long service.** We make **all styles** of plates. **A dentist who has had many years' experience** in making and fitting **dental plates, that look right and fit right,** supervises all work.

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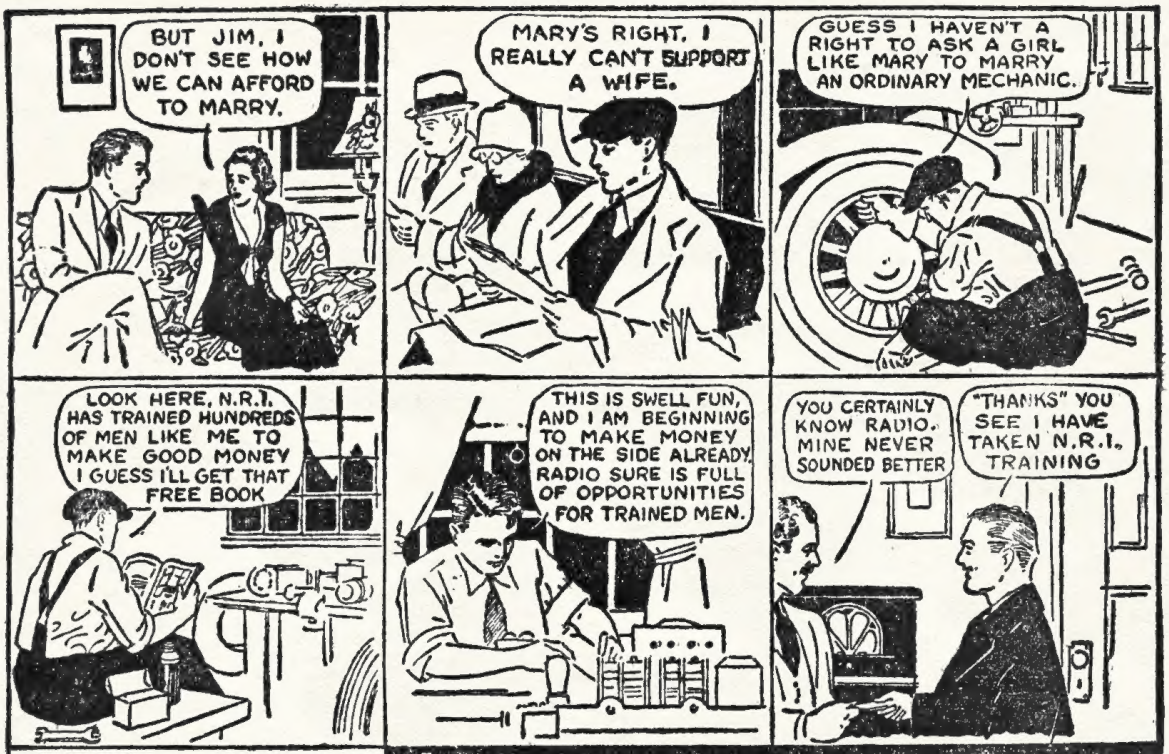
BUT JIM, I DON'T SEE HOW WE CAN AFFORD TO MARRY.
MARY'S RIGHT, I REALLY CAN'T SUPPORT A WIFE.
GUESS I HAVEN'T A RIGHT TO ASK A GIRL LIKE MARY TO MARRY AN ORDINARY MECHANIC.
LOOK HERE, N.R.I. HAS TRAINED HUNDREDS OF MEN LIKE ME TO MAKE GOOD MONEY I GUESS I'LL GET THAT FREE BOOK
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"THANKS" YOU SEE I HAVE TAKEN N.R.I. TRAINING
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YES MARY, AND THERE'S A REAL FUTURE FOR US IN THIS RADIO FIELD.

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J. E. SMITH, President
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Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay well for trained men. Fixing Radio sets in spare time pays many $200 to $500 a year—full time jobs with Radio jobbers, manufacturers and dealers as much as $30, $50, $75 a week. Many Radio Experts open full or part time Radio sales and repair businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen in good-pay jobs with opportunities for advancement. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loudspeaker systems are newer fields offering good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises to open many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of radio. Read how they got their jobs. Mail coupon.

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Act Today. Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my training in Radio and Television; shows you letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 9DO9
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

HERE'S PROOF THAT MY TRAINING PAYS

Chief Operator Broadcasting Station

"When I completed 20 lessons I obtained my Radio Broadcast Operator's license and immediately joined station WMPC, where I am now Chief Operator." — HOLLIS F. HAYES, 85 Madison St., Lapeer, Mich.

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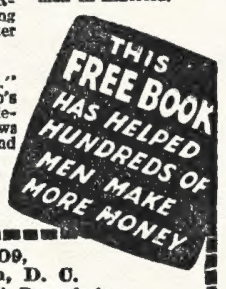
"For the last 18 months I have been in business for myself, making between $200 and $300 a month. I have N.R.I. to thank for my start in this field."—ARLIE J. FROEHNER, 224 W. Texas Ave., Goose Creek, Texas.



J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 9DO9,
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Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please Write Plainly.)

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TEXAS RANGERS

Vol. 8, No. 2 April, 1939 Price 10c

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A Full Book-Length Novel

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By JACKSON COLE

Jim Hatfield of the Rangers Fights a Sidewinder who Plans to Ruin a Vast Empire of the Old Southwest—and Lone Star Law Cuts Another Notch on its Holster in a Powdersmoke Showdown! Follow the Lone Wolf as He Battles Against the Sinister Greed of Range Desperadoes - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - 13

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A Bandit Trio Try to Dry-gulch a Gun-slinging Ranger!

WEST OF THE PECOS - - - - - - - - - - Syl Mac Dowell 98
Ranger Adams Braves the Dangers of Renegade Country

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FAMOUS TEXAS RANGERS - - - - - A Story in Pictures 90
Captain John J. Tumlinson, Courageous Indian Fighter

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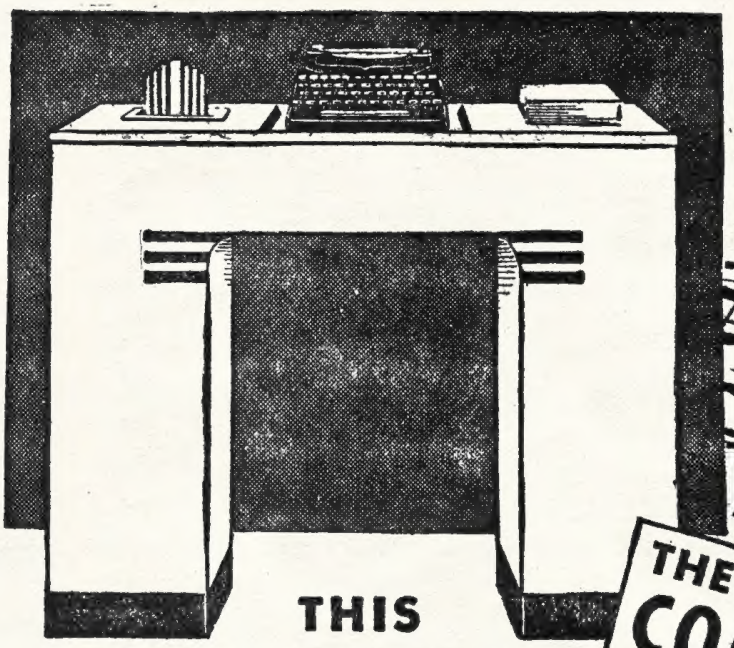

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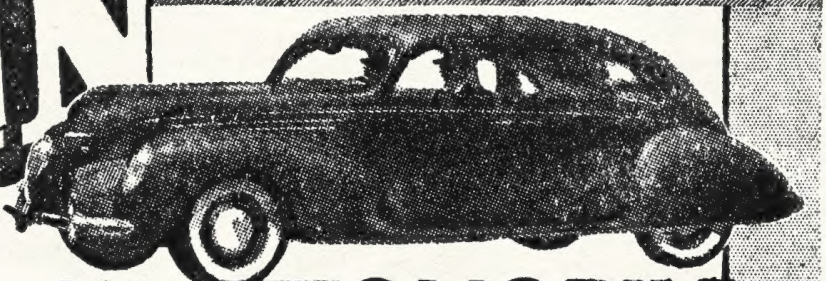

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Like Puzzles? Here's A Good One

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G-MEN

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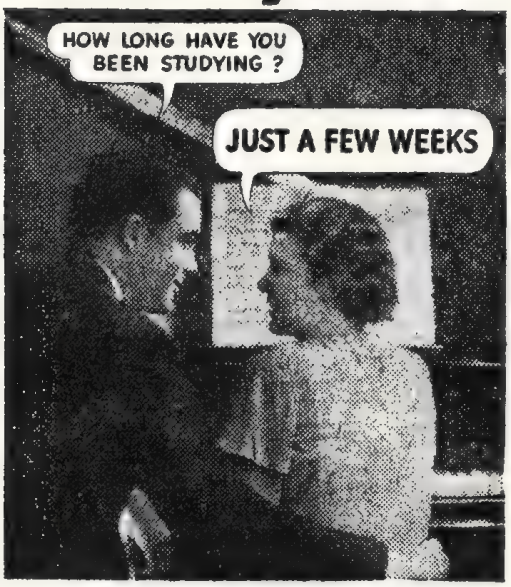

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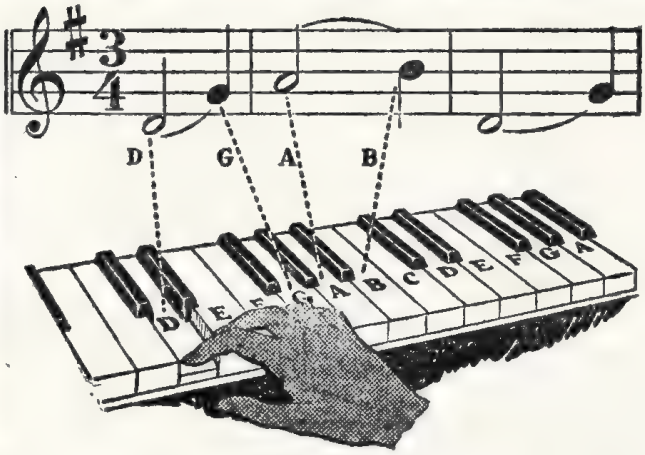
Yet it's from the famous "Merry Widow" Waltz!



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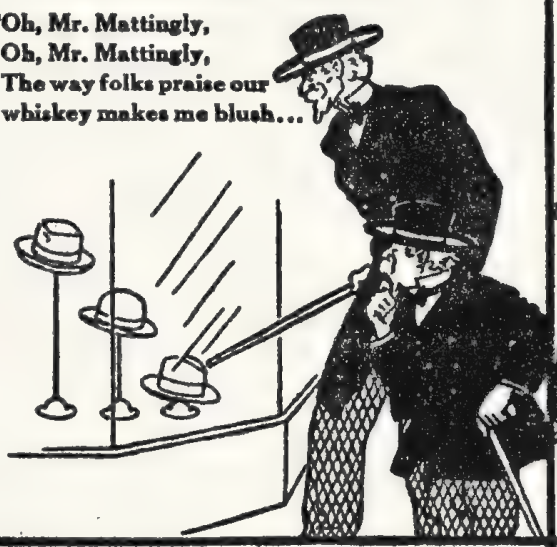

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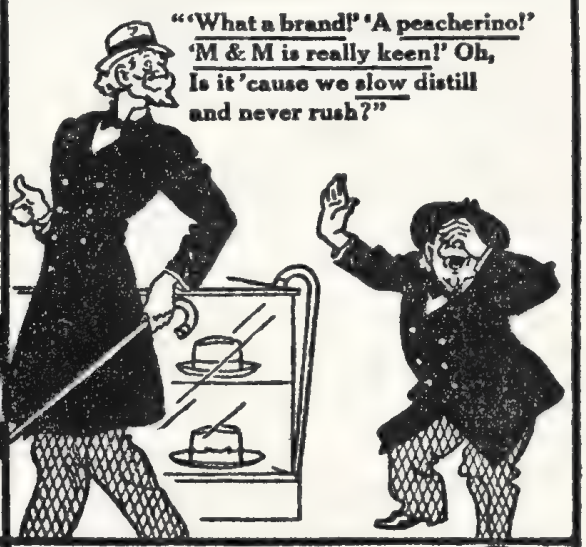

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Vol. 8, No. 2 TEXAS RANGERS *April, 1939*

VAQUERO GUNS

Hatfield lifted the hombre and flung him against the wall (Chap. III)

Jim Hatfield of the Rangers Fights a Sidewinder Who Plans to Ruin a Vast Empire of the Old Southwest

By JACKSON COLE

Author of "Lone Star Silver," "Gunsmoke Empire," etc.

CHAPTER I

Range of Death

THE east-bound express, a gigantic serpent in the rain-swept night, puffed heavily up the long grade. Black smoke billowed from the chunky engine stack, reddened by glowing cinders, the wheels shrieking on the steel rails; the searchlight's overpowering eye pierced the mists.

Lightning intermittently flashed, the thunderous peals echoing through the mountains; the stunning white flares exposed a raw, unheaved land,

A Complete Full-Length Action Novel

spiny cactus growths in alkaline, rocky soil.

Shouts in a car of the train were drowned in the confusion of majestic sound. A dark figure leaped from a door, hit the graded cinders along the track, rolled over and over down a bank, bringing up against a heap of stones.

Another showed in the yellow rectangle of the train door, a gun blazed, stumbled, caught himself, pushed on. Looking back, he saw the train had halted up the mountain and was disgorging pursuers.

"Damn them!" he raved.

a tiny crackle against Nature's might.

Then the train had passed and the man who had jumped from it got up, hurried from the right-of-way, through the dark, rainy night. As he ran, a metallic clinking came from steel cuffs dangling at his wrist; he

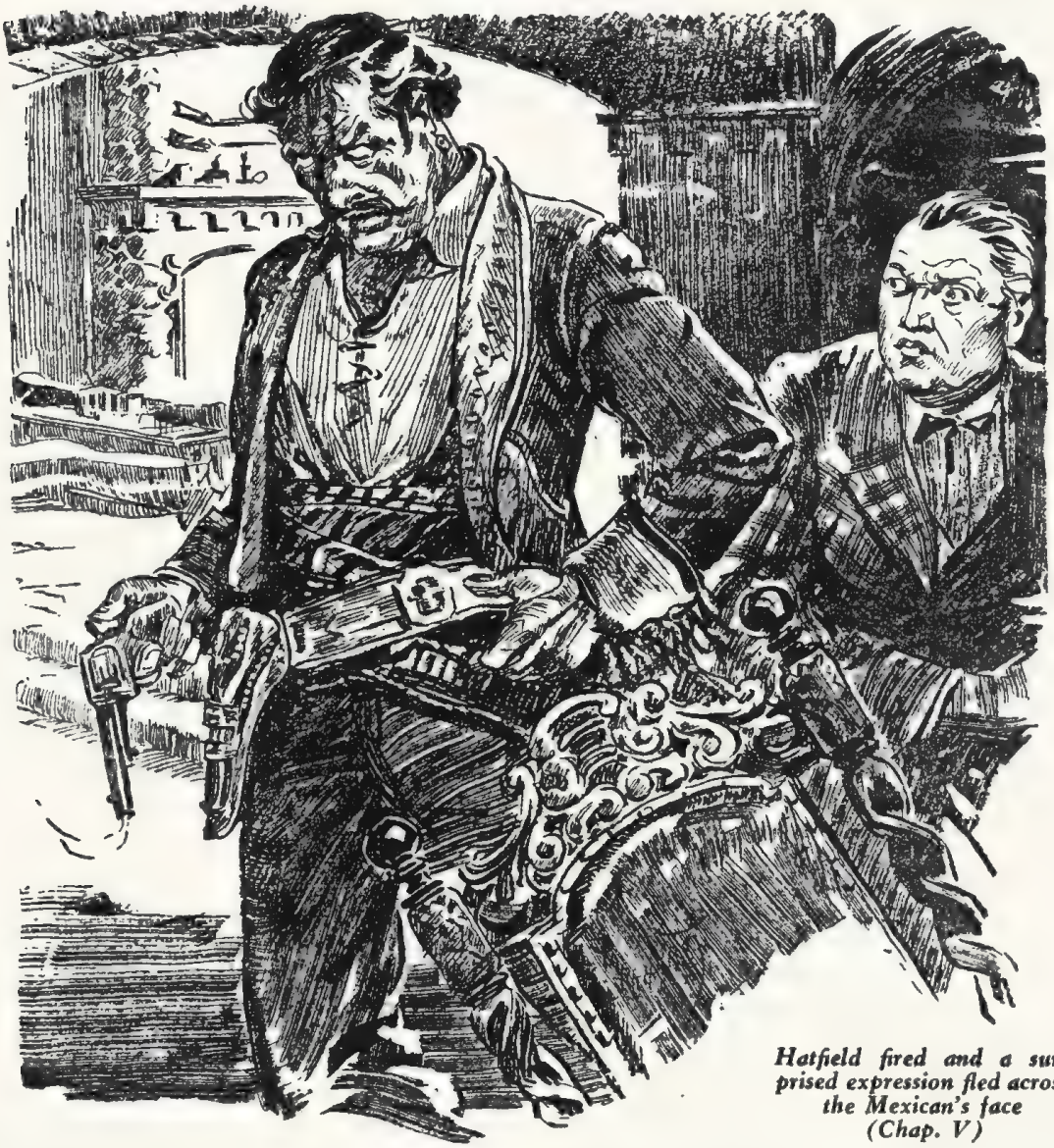
He sensed movement nearby; again the lightning crashed and about him wet bodies of big steers huddled in the hollow, from the storm. A few yards off a cowboy, wrapped in glistening poncho, sat his saddle, chin on breast, faithful to his charge.

Like a stalking panther the killer flitted from rock to rock. Soon he was upon the waddy, with a feline spring he was up behind his prey, slashing at his face with the heavy handcuff.

"Hey, what—" shrieked the astounded puncher, but a forearm that was a steel band cut off his breath.

A hand drove to the .45 Colt strapped at the waddy's waist. Flickers of light, bobbing toward the spot, warned the fugitive they were on his trail, searching with lanterns. The mustang bucked in alarm; there was a half-muffled explosion and the gun, rammed against the cowboy's ribs, blew out his life.

Blood spread over horse and saddle, on the murderer, who threw the corpse off. A heavy fist lined the mustang into running position. Again lightning flashed on the horrible



Hatfield fired and a surprised expression fled across the Mexican's face (Chap. V)

scene. The twisted, ferocious face of the killer showed as he looked back, gritted teeth gleaming, his eyes fiery as a beast's.

He rode till dawn streaked the sky, driving the horse relentlessly. Then pausing, he hid in the bush, having shaken off the pursuit.

Three days later, unrecognizable from dirt and beard growth, the killer mounted the weary mustang, goaded near to death. Viciously he kicked the broken horse through a winding trail in the chaparral, but the animal was through and finally sank under him.

He cursed with fury; then, down a slope, through a leafy vista, saw a rider swiftly loping west, eyes on the trail. The awful eyes of the killer glowed red; he left the wind-broken mustang and hurried down to the trail crossing. Stolen gun in hand he lurked, and as the rider came up he leaped out, grasped the reins, fired pointblank into the horseman's heart.

It was but the work of a few moments to pull the dead man from the saddle. The piebald mustang was strong and he needed a good horse to make Old Mexico and complete his escape from justice. The piebald stood quietly enough while he held the reins; he took a loop around a mesquite limb to make sure of his mount. Then he dragged the dead man well back into the bushes.

An hour later, having eaten some of the food found in the saddle-bags, he returned to the trail, only to find that the piebald mustang had broken the leather straps and run away, leaving him again afoot.

Desperate, he retreated back to a high point, to watch the road, and soon he saw from his perch two riders approaching from east. He hid himself along the trail and when they were abreast, he jumped out to face them, gun ready.

"Fred!" the killer growled.

For an instant the leading horseman stared; then his jaw dropped, he shook as with palsy.

"Dowd—Russ Dowd!"

Suddenly the third man whirled his horse, to ride back around the turn and get away, but Russ Dowd fired, the slug rapping sharply between the man's shoulder blades. The fleeing victim flexed back, dying in the saddle.

"You — shouldn't 've done that, Russ," gasped Fred.

"I can't take chances," the icy killer snarled. "Got to escape and you're goin' to help me!"

JERRY FARMON headed for the southwest country. He was hunting his partner, Deputy Sheriff Bill Cole. Loyal to his friend, Farmon was worried, for Cole should have wired back long ago, in his chase after the murderer who had shot a cowboy up north.

Farmon was well-built, lean in youth; he had clean blue eyes and a straight nose. The set of his sun-bronzed features was pleasant; he wore brown chaps, blue shirt open at the neck. In all he was a good-looking, curly-haired young fellow.

"I'll find him," he muttered. "I wonder if Cole caught up with that killer too sudden-like?"

He was crossing wide, rolling range, split by mesquite ridges running roughly north and south, mountains blue in the east and west distances. The cows he saw were nearly all branded with an "A" that was square, the bottom side formed by the crossbar.

He paused, the thunder of hoofs making him swing in his saddle. He noticed smoke haze in the east, over a bushy flat, and dust rose as a bunch of mustangs galloped his way, tails high, eyes wild in fear of fire. Drawing aside, Farmon watched the beautiful bodies speed past, and suddenly an electric shock caused his heart to jump.

One of the band leaders was a piebald mustang. "That's Cole's Buck or I'm loco," he gasped, and touched his mare Sal with a spur, starting in pursuit to make dead certain. The piebald had been Cole's pet and on Buck, the deputy had set out after the criminal. Buck wouldn't let anyone else ride him if he could help it and would escape if he got half a chance.

Intent on the chase, to be sure it

was Buck and hoping the horse might furnish a clue as to Cole's fate, Jerry Farmon rode hell-for-leather after the bunch. They led him west, and clusters of cows looked up, snorting, joining the stampede.

A long line of ominous riders suddenly broke into Farmon's view, beyond the rise and dust raised by the running stock. They caught sight of Jerry, and Winchester rifles were thrown up. Farmon, sliding Sal to a halt at the sound of menacing bullets, stared in astonishment at the uncalled-for attack.

The grim riders who fired on him approached with a businesslike air Jerry did not fancy; quickly he decided to retreat. The presence of Buck was warning enough, and the lead cinched it. If they had shot Cole, they would shoot him.

"Mexes," he growled.

Save for slight individual differences, the vaqueros were clad in what amounted to a uniform. They wore steeple sombreros of jet-black, hairy felt, the brilliant Texas sun scintillating from rows of silver "A's" strung up and down the crown. Farmon made out the short, black-velvet jackets, wide crimson sashes, over which some wore very wide, silver-studded belts. The set faces were dark, plainly enraged. They were heavily armed with Winchester rifles and Colt revolvers, besides the inevitable long knife.

"Figger I better find out more, 'fore I sashay up to them vaqueros," he muttered, and let Sal have her head. She was, the chestnut mare, slim of ankle, with a long, very swift stride, and the vaqueros, though magnificent riders, did not overtake him, though they quickened their pace.

THE smoke in the east grew thicker, range animals drifting from it. Farmon coughed, swung southeast, as the smoke seemed thinner that way. "Bush fire," he said aloud, looking back at the vaqueros.

They fired his way, the lead whistling on the dry, hot air. Jerry could see licking tongues of flame, urged by the wind; its red breast surged across the rolling valley. Most of the

Jim Hatfield

vaqueros headed for the fire, leaping down with blankets and ponchos to beat it out. Half a dozen stayed after Farmon and he found his route blocked by a step rock ridge.

A fusillade rang from north, a couple of the fire-fighters threw up their arms, crashed dead. The others ran for their rifles; a battle opened, and was fiercely contested across the smoky horizon. The men who were chasing Jerry paused, and tore back to help their mates.

Farmon glimpsed the other gang. They were led by a giant hombre on a great white stallion whose deep voice roared over the din. Shrieks and curses sounded between heavy gunfire; the battle tide surged up and down, men locking in individual combat to the death. At first the attackers beat back the vaqueros; they surged close enough so Farmon made out the piggish, broken-snouted countenance of the giant leader. But the vaqueros were brave; they fought back valiantly, stopping the charge.

Farmon shrugged, began to make his way through the rocks, away from the melee. Such a feud was none of his business. It was local, and he did not know which was in the right, the Mexicans or the other gang.

Late that afternoon he saw the town before him. It was set in a narrow river valley and on the west side was a redoubt, an old fort, that partially cut off his view. Rounding this breastwork, the town opened before him, tree-shaded plaza in the center, a whitewashed Town Hall of large size, wooden-awninged walks, saloons, stores and homes, stables behind them.

"Belfort," Jerry muttered absent mindedly.

Belfort, Terrell County seat, was known as the Chaparral Metropolis. It looked peaceful enough at first glance. Saddled horses stood in the shade, reins over the continuous hitch-racks; here and there an elderly citizen sat, smoking and whittling.

FARMON left Sal under a big live oak of the plaza and strolled over to the biggest saloon, the "Alamo," for a drink. The bartender proved willing to talk.

"That's the Square A, biggest spread in the kentry," he began. "Shore, them vaqueros 'll shoot yuh. There's a war on, waddy, and we mean to wipe them Mexes out. We ain't the on'y ones, either; other towns, Rio Springs in Brewster and settlements in Pecos County 're havin' trouble. Them Ambert people got to be taught others have a right to live in this world."

Jerry's jaw tightened. Bill Cole, then, must have been shot down by those grim vaqueros, shot on Square A range. According to the barkeeper, the whole land for miles was in a state of foment, the feud was on.

He ate at the Alamo, rested; at dawn started back for the Square A with a thorough description of how to reach the main hacienda. This time he did not openly ride the trail but carefully avoided all contact with roving bands of vaqueros and as this took time and backtracking, it was night again before he reached the great ranch. The Spanish style home was turreted and gleamed white in the moonlight of the valley. There were sentries out but Farmon dodged them, using patches of high mesquite, studded with star blooms, as cover.

On foot he stalked to the end of the long, shaded veranda in front, climbed a rail, glided to the open door.

In one swift glance he saw the gathering inside the richly furnished great main hall of the hacienda. They were divided into groups, three men sitting together before a huge fireplace at Farmon's left as he entered. Two of these jumped up to confront him.

One was lean, with a dark, saturnine face dominated by deep-set black eyes; he had a high-bridged nose, severe mouth, black hair sparse on top. He wore a plain dark suit, white shirt and black string tie. His voice grated harsh as he demanded:

"Who are you, sir—and what do you want?"

The second was thicker set; his broad, clean-shaven face was startled, as they all stared at the young waddy who had so suddenly appeared among them. He wore a brown, Eastern-cut lounge suit; there was a handsome sweep to his brow, and the high cheekbones, under quick brown eyes, gave him a distinguished appearance. His hair was very light, carefully clipped short.

Past them, Farmon next took in the girl sitting on a divan with a fattish, younger man. She was lovely, raven-black, thick hair on her trim head; the sun had made her complexion a golden wonder. Her body was full, now she wore a blue silk dress that set off her blossoming figure. The sight of her shook Jerry; he hadn't expected to run into a woman, and such a woman. His quick look into her eyes, open and boyish, betrayed his interest.

He caught the scowl of the insipidly good-looking stoutish young gentleman who rose with the girl, a man of about Farmon's years, but plainly one who had lived a pampered life. His brown hair was carefully sleeked back, face full with a spoiled pout to the mouth. His hands looked soft, pudgy. He was immaculately dressed.

Farmon swung back on the saturnine hombre who accosted him; the man in brown backed up his friend.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"Which one of you is John Ambert," asked Farmon.

"I am," the lean fellow replied, after a short pause. "This is my attorney, Mr. Martin Bond." His voice took on a sarcastic ring which made Jerry flush hotly.

AMBERT held himself imperviously, as became the boss of such a feudal empire as the Square A. With a wave of his delicate hand he went on, speaking with biting irony.

"The lady is my niece, Miss Louise Ambert. The young gentleman with her is Mr. George Pennock, the son of Commissioner Hiram Pennock."

Farmon was fussed; he knew Ambert was being very sarcastic. They were leery of him, as though they expected him to drag his gun and start shooting up the place. He nodded to acknowledge the introductions, gave a brief glance at Commissioner Pennock, who was sitting behind Farmon and Bond.

Pennock was a short, fat man with a bald head and sagging chins. There was a family resemblance between father and son, but the elder Pennock emanated an aura of power. The Commissioner's eyes were partially closed, and he gripped in his strong teeth a black cigar, the bluish smoke haze slowly rising about his gross face; the tobacco had a perfumed odor to it. His double chin rested on his stuffed white shirt bosom, the lapels of his black suit sprinkled with cigar ash. He said nothing, simply watched through veiled eyes.

"Perhaps," Ambert said bitingly, "you'll be so good as to tell me who *you* are."

"My name's Jerry Farmon," the young man said gruffly. They had made him feel awkward, out of place. "I come from up north, Lenox. Lookin' for my pardner, William Cole, a deputy sheriff from the same county."

"And," Ambert remarked, still ironic, "you believe we are hiding him from you, is that it?"

Farmon, seeing Louise Ambert, had taken off his brown Stetson, and was rolling the brim in his fingers. They kept looking at the hat. Anger burned him, the way they stared, as though he were something the cat had dragged in. He knew that Ambert and Bond had him covered with small pistols hidden in their coat pockets. He set his boots square on the floor, said stubbornly:

"I think yuh killed Cole—that yore men did."

A flush spread over Ambert's lean cheeks. He glanced at Bond, the lawyer frowned, shook his head. Louise sniffed in disdain, Jerry was aware she was clenching her fists in anger.

"I understand," said Ambert. "You say we're murderers."

"Ev'rybuddy in three counties thinks so."

Ambert took a step toward the waddy. "Why, you—!"

"Stop, John," Bond ordered, pushing between them. "I'll handle this. Watch your tongue, young fellow. This is Mr. Ambert's home. You've no right to force your way in here and insult him. You're breaking the law. However, let's hear your story, but make it fast. If there's anything we can do, we'll do it."

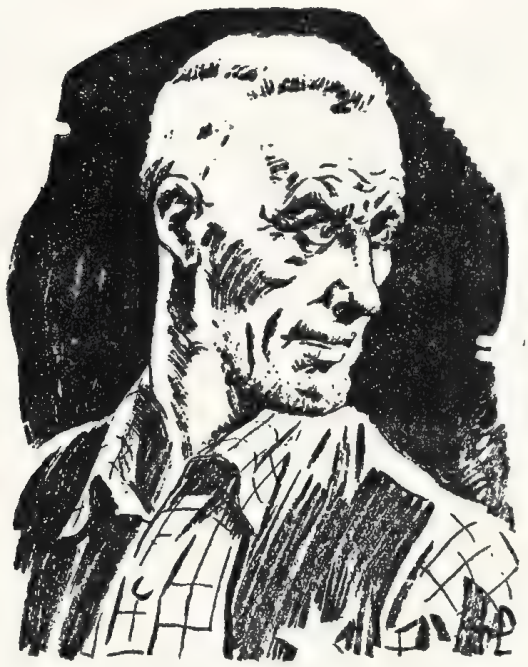
The lawyer's offer somewhat mollified Farmon. He began to tell his story but before he was well started, George Pennock jumped to his feet. "I never heard such twaddle," he cried impatiently. "I wouldn't let any two-bit waddy talk so to me!"

Farmon scowled at him, as Pennock took a belligerent step toward him. "Siddown and keep shet," he ordered coldly.

PENNOCK bristled but the determined, strong face of Farmon wilted him; with a glance at Jerry's holstered gun, he faded back, face reddening.

"You get out!" Louise Ambert said loudly, "Uncle Jack, look at his brown hat; he must be a spy for our enemies." She stamped a small slippered foot . . . and reciprocal anger burned Jerry though he was fascinated by the color tinging her smooth cheeks, the spirited flash of her eyes.

Intent on her, he saw she was looking past him, and caught the derisive grin that came to George Pennock's fat mouth. He started to turn, as



Slim Shad

Louise ordered, "Grab him, Fernando. Get his gun and throw him off the ranch."

Farmon was whirling, but before he could draw to protect himself, hold them back, half a dozen vaqueros who had come up stealthily behind him, pinioned his arms. Louise's raised voice had drowned what slight sounds they made approaching. Fernando, the leader, was a tall, handsome Mexican with long sideburns, flashing teeth, a dandy's tiny mustache. He was elegantly clad in velvet, wore the crimson sash over a wide leather belt studded with brass pyramids. He pressed his drawn knife to Farmon's back ribs.

Louise laughed. "Stay off our range. If you come here again hunting trouble you'll find it."

George Pennock stepped toward Jerry. With no warning he slapped the waddy in the face, the sound was sharp in the room. For the first time, Hiram spoke. He had a deep voice, like a bear's snarl.

"Georgie! You young fool, mind your own business."

The infuriated Farmon fought to get his hands free to attack young Pennock; he had never been so angry and the fact that he sensed George was a suitor for the beautiful Louise's hand didn't calm his emotions.

Fernando grinned at the helpless cowboy as the vaqueros roughly shoved him out. Escorted to the ranch boundary, Jerry was released. As he rode off, stiff in the saddle, bullets sang angrily overhead to speed him on his way. Cold fury had replaced the hotness of Farmon's rage.

"I'll be back!" he muttered as he turned and shook his fist.

Later that night a pitched battle was fought along the western border of the Square A, many miles from the hacienda. Vaqueros in black steeple sombreros swept through a town, shooting it up. Townsmen, hurriedly mounting and arming, hotly pursued; the gunfight left several men with crippling lead in them.

The storm clouds of hate massed over the great country of the Square A. Death and destruction rode the range.

CHAPTER II

Man of the Hour

CAPTAIN WILLIAM McDOWELL, grizzled old Ranger captain, banged a gnarled fist on his desk, leaped to his feet, catching his old Frontier Model Colt six-shooter on the bounce.

However, at this violent movement his lame back doubled him up with a spasm of anguish, took all the ginger out of him and he sank back into his office chair, realizing the disabilities of age that no longer would allow him personally to take up the urgent law matter set forth in the telegram before him. No longer could Cap'n Bill ride the danger trail.

He hit the bell so hard it squealed and at the attendant who answered he bellowed, "Fetch Lieutenant Hatfield, pronto."

He spent the intervening minutes impatiently cursing his wornout carcass. "Hell to pay," he grumbled.

When his star officer entered Austin headquarters, McDowell again rose, more carefully this time.

These two men understood one another; words were seldom necessary. The heart of the grim old Captain who in his younger days had played havoc among Indians and bandits who raided the Lone Star State, still beat with a fighting man's courage. The spirit was willing, but the flesh was weak.

Before the rugged old frontiersman stood the Ranger in the prime of his power. A man of steel and hickory, who dealt the Law's hand with the stunning, irresistible force of chain lightning.

"Jim kin outfit and outthink any jigger or passel of rascals," thought McDowell. Again he felt that sense of comfort at sight of the mighty Ranger, the emotion that he was placing Texas's life in hands that would never fail till stilled by death.

Under that wide Stetson, set straight on crisp black hair, the Ranger's face was serene. Steady, gray-green eyes looked down into the tall McDowell's, eyes that in battle darkened to the hue of an Arctic sea, the sight of them sending terror streaking through evil hearts. The bronzed face was too strong to be called handsome; softened by a wide mouth, good-humored in repose, it was a face that held men, caused them to speak softly and with deep respect.

In shirt, vest, bandanna, riding pants tucked into expensive halfboots with silver spurs, Jim Hatfield stood well over six feet. He had a broad, deep chest; at the end of long-muscled arms hung slim hands, surprisingly well-kept, so kept because the moment they slowed, Texas would lose its greatest power for good.

McDowell took in the pistols of blue steel, in supple oiled holsters, eyes rising to the sweep of the fighting jaw, and thought, "Them guns 've done more for Texas than all the statutes ever passed!"

Answering his captain's greeting, the tall jigger's voice was deceptively soft—many a braggart murderer had foolishly misjudged the quiet of the Ranger's bearing.

"Yuh sent for me, suh?"

"Yeah, Jim, war in the southwest, Terrell mainly, Brewster and Pecos counties sucked in. Here's a wire from Sheriff Tom Barr in Belfort, hub of the fuss, says two dozen 've awready died, many more wounded. Jest the start. Barr can't handle it. There's riots and range burnin' flared up around the borders of the Square A Ranch."

Hatfield knew of the tremendous spread.

"Biggest outfit in Texas," went on Cap'n Bill. "She laps over the Rio into Mexico. Hires hundreds of Mexes as riders. Never had trouble afore, but Barr says they're locked. Yuh'll hafta hustle. Townsmen and smaller ranchers 've lined up, threatenin' to wipe out the Amberts. Ranger law is needed there."

The Ranger must plunge into the raging cauldron of sectional war, in an attempt to cool men's passions. He knew that such passions, easily inflamed by self-seeking men, are hard to down.

"I kin trust Tom Barr?" he asked.

"Yuh kin ride the river with him." McDowell held up a hand as Hatfield swung. "Jest take a peek at this, Jim. Guv'nor sent it over, it's from the rurales, Mex State Police. I callate the Square A put 'em up to complainin' to Washington."

HATFIELD read the messages. One, from the rurales:

"If the Texas authorities cannot check the wanton murders in the district about the Square A Ranch, would permission be granted by the State Department to the rurales to cross the Rio Grande and restore order?"

Hatfield did not miss the sharp reprimand attached by the United States Secretary of State.

The gray-green eyes darkened. "Guess the rurales 're right salty hombres at that," he drawled. He understood. The good name and reputation of that great organization known as the Texas Rangers was at stake, completely in his hands.

He took his leave of McDowell. Outside, in the brilliant sun, stood a magnificent golden sorrel, a fit mount for the expert horseman. The beautiful, tawny coat of Goldy, the Ranger's pet gelding, glistened with the finest care; the long mane and tail were a shade darker than the coat, brushed to a nicety of perfection. Goldy whinnied in pleasure, playfully nipped at the big man's hand as Hatfield reached for the horn to mount.

Once in the seat, McDowell's set face watching from a window, the tall officer headed the sorrel southwest, warsack rolled in poncho at the cantle, rifle in boot under left leg. . . .

The sunset red had swiftly faded, the moon bathed the rolling southwest range in a silver glow.

Voices raised in rage around the bend of the trail to Belfort, caused the Ranger to exert a gentle knee pressure that brought the golden sorrel to an obebient halt.

"You're a rascal, pure and simple, suh, and you can't intimidate Jeremiah Welles! Go ahaid and shoot, suh, and be damned to you."

A little breeze on which the sounds came clearly to Hatfield caressed his face; it was fragrant with the aromatic odor of plants, mesquite with waxy white blossoms, creosote and sage, lining the road. In sandy flats nestled cacti, ocotillo and bayonet, prickly pear with green-and-yellow fruit; high mesquite ridges loomed in the distance. This was southwest Texas, the wilderness the Ranger loved, that he would lay down his life to protect.

To the bold defiance of that high-pitched voice answered another man: "Why, yuh little crab, I'll take yuh to pieces, one by one!" He spoke with a queer twang that grated unpleasantly on the listening Ranger's ear.

"Aw, c'mon, let's git it over with," still a third growled, less definite in timbre. "Drag him."

JUST around the bend, Hatfield slipped from his saddle, gave Goldy a warning touch, strolled to a point where he could see the group in the middle of the rocky trail. The Ranger was not so spick-and-span as when he had left McDowell; the stains of his swift, long trip showed on him and on Goldy, too.

The sounds of conflict, the shrill, berating voice of the victim, filled the captor's ears as they dragged him off his horse. Hatfield was only a few yards back, in the shadows, taking it all in. The faces of the trio who held one man were dark blobs in the silver sheen.

"Masked," mused Hatfield. They stood around a prisoner who was hidden from him by the bulk of the bodies. That definite, grating twang again smote the Ranger's ear:

"Looka, Jedge Welles. We got a strong organerzation behind us, too powerful for you or anybody to buck, savvy? We mean business and 'll have our way. This is yore last chance. Discharge Cactus Charlie and his three pals when they're brought afore yuh or yuh die here and now. Yuh won't lose; we're willin' to pay yuh well."

Something gleamed in the moonlight, something metal, held on the victim.

"Huh," thought Hatfield, pricking up his mental ears. "This is interestin'."

It was not, as at first sight appeared, a simple holdup. The man with the shrill voice was a magistrate, riding the circuit to preside at a trial in Belfort, county seat of Terrell. The judge faced his fate bravely, never quailing.

As they shifted, Hatfield glimpsed his tiny figure. "Nothing you do will make me cheat justice," shouted Welles.

"Better listen, Jedge. Cactus Charlie and his pals're on our side, against the Square A. Them dirty Mexes took 'em in a fight, claimed they shot some vaqueros and burnt the range. We don't aim to let anything happen to 'em. Free 'em when they come up. No use to lie now, 'cause we'll kill yuh later if yuh cross us."

A short slap sounded. The little judge had managed to get a hand free to slap the lean, beanpole man whose face, save for glowing eyes, was swathed in a mask.

With an oath, the thin hombre knocked the judge down, began kicking him in the belly and face; the other two fell on the victim, who still defied them with his last breath.

Jim Hatfield, with a few strides, was in. "Git up—and yore hands, too, gents!" he ordered.

The sound of that compelling voice panicked them. The surprised gunmen lost their nerve for a moment, rolling frantically away, and the magistrate, freed of their weight, came up on his knees, still telling them off.

"Who—who the hell's that?" gasped a thick-set hombre to Hatfield's right.

"Three on one's too oneven, gents," drawled the Ranger. "S'pose yuh three ride on ahaid. Tomorrow the jedge can decide what he wants to do with yuh—"

A gun smashed the night, suddenly as Fate's hand. Without warning a masked man on the Ranger's left, only a dark blob against the mesquite, opened fire. The bullet whirled through Hatfield's pant leg, singed the flesh.

"Kill him! Get him!" shrieked Twangy Voice, but himself did a back dive into the bush, where evidently they had their horses hidden, for Hatfield, busy with the others, heard the pounding of retreating hoofs.

The man who had fired at the Ranger had done so without taking that instant-fraction vital to perfect aim. The tall jigger's blue-steel Colt blazed as an echo of the hasty shot and the tiny judge danced up and down, shrieking.

"Good shot, you got him! Look out, there—!" Bravely, Judge Welles attempted to stop the second gunman who, taking advantage of Hatfield's concentration on his mate, had two pistols trained on the turning officer.

GUNS blared once, twice—and again—a shriek of anguish smashed the night.

Silence descended. For a moment the whole universe seemed to stop breathing. Then the small judge gave an explosive sigh. "Never saw such shootin', suh," he complimented, stepping over a corpse to the tall Hatfield,

Piggy Vorberg

and looking up into the rugged face, the strong jaw line gleaming in the moonlight. "Why—you ain't even excited!"

The two-gun man lay on his spine in the dirt, kicking spasmodically. One of his bullets had spurted up dust between Hatfield's spread boots, the second had sped wide of its mark as the Lone Wolf had coolly put a single slug through the white expanse of forehead over the mask.

Judge Welles glanced down at the dead gunman. "Bull's-eye, suh. You win a cigar."

The hand that held out the black stogie did not tremble in the least and Jim Hatfield knew the tiny magistrate was no coward. "Thanks, Jedge. I won't smoke it now, but I'll light a match for yuh." He struck a match and for a moment held it up to his own face so Welles might look him over.

"Clever, too, eh?" laughed Welles. "You're right, I did want a clear look at you."

In the flickering match light, Hatfield saw distinctly the white hair of the peppery little circuit judge, the black-clad tiny figure, very light-blue, seamed eyes; the man's nose and

mouth were strong, lines about the latter showing stubborn determination.

Welles asked no questions. "We'll let that carrion lie. You saved my life, young man. I'm on my way to Belfort, to preside at the trial of a quartet of murderers and range burners and hold regular court. Those rascals stopped me, tried to scare me into lettin' off their pals." The judge was very grateful to the Ranger.

Hatfield offered his own explanation: "My name's Jim Harris, Jedge. Happened to be wanderin' by and heard the argyment. I'm headin' for Belfort myself, so s'pose we ride together."

"Fine," said Welles enthusiastically. "I'll feel mighty safe, suh, with you at my side."

Hatfield helped catch his black horse and the judge sprang into the saddle with surprising agility. Goldy came up at the Ranger's call and the two rode southwest, across the final ridges to Belfort.

Down below, in the river valley they saw the twinkling lights of the Chaparral Metropolis. They hit Main Street at the north end; to the west the old Indian fort showed black, and east the river purled gently on its way to the Rio Grande.

The wide dirt way was lined with stores and homes, saloons, built of adobe brick or wood; some had false second-story fronts above the continuous wooden awnings that shaded from the hot sun. In the center was the usual plaza with trees and flowering shrubs. The square Town Hall dominated the town.

The Ranger, riding in with the magistrate, saw armed men stalking the ways, grim-faced, suspicious of eye; there was an ominous, brooding air over Belfort. There was excitement but it was not the kind that brings hilarity; rather was it inner emotion that comes just before a battle.

Judge Jeremiah Welles was weary from a long ride, from the manhandling he had undergone. Hatfield saw the jurist to the primitive hotel. "You'll be around again, won't you?" Welles asked anxiously.

"Yes, suh. I'll be around."

"Good night, then. And thanks once more."

QUIETLY Hatfield led Goldy to the edge of the plaza and, afoot, slid along the walk, eyes missing nothing. Nearing the Town Hall, which was lighted, he meant to contact Sheriff Tom Barr; it was the Ranger's habit to look over a situation in detail before striking. In that way he might drive unerringly to the heart of a problem and give no warning to the enemy that he was near until ready to scoop them up.

He stepped up on the stoop. The wide front door was closed but unlocked; it swung to behind him and, passing through a wide entry, with a door to his right marked "COUNTY COMMISSIONER," he turned into a half-open portal over which the sign said: "SHERIFF'S OFFICE."

The big room was lit, and furnished with a large desk, chairs, a mat and brass cuspidors. Across it was an opening through which he could see the steel bars of a cell.

The office seemed deserted. He glanced to the rear where there was another door. A spider had spun its web in an upper angle and Hatfield did not miss the violent oscillation of the silky strands.

"Somebody moved outa here mighty fast," he mused. "Why should they?" Ears alert he heard a door softly pulled to in the back, and started that way.

As he moved, the other side of the big desk came within his range of vision and he stopped on his spurs, turned, went over.

A man lay doubled against the side of the desk and whitewashed wall. A stocky hombre with stringy brown hair and a handlebar mustache of the same hue, clad in blue pants and boots, a five-pointed star on his vest catching the lamplight. His chin touched his chest, his head was unnaturally shoved by his weight against the wall base.

He was dead, and the black handle of the knife driven into his heart stuck up from the ribs.

CHAPTER III

Deputy Shad

THE Ranger's alert face tightened, grim interest accentuating the lines of the fighting jaw, as he knelt by the murdered sheriff.

"Callate I can't get any advice from Tom Barr," he muttered.

He was looking at the knife handle, worn smooth by many hands.

"Reach for the ceilin', yuh murderin' skunk!"

That voice startled the tall Ranger; it pierced sharp as any knife point, and he could tell that the man training a gun on his spine stood some feet behind him, by the front entry.

Hatfield carefully raised his hands, before he slowly looked around.

The hombre had his narrow feet wide spread, teeth gritted, scowling at him. His captor wore a deputy's badge, and he was incredibly bony, with protruding cheek-bones over which the sun-yellowed skin stretched tight. His hat was off, exposing a bullet head, the colorless hair clipped so close white scalp showed through.

He had long eyes, fishy eyes, a small sharp nose between; large hands, the one holding the six-gun pinning the Ranger with black, unwinking orb, was skin and bone, and the thin forearm, tautened to the pistol grip, seemed only stringy muscles. His ears stuck out; he was nearly as tall as Hatfield so his thinness was accentuated. The gunbelt, spare shells gleaming, sagged, for he had no more hips than a snake.

He hitched the belt up with his left hand, a habitual gesture, without looking away from the Ranger. In tight black pants his thighs looked like clothes-poles.

"Howdy, Depitty," drawled Hatfield. "I jest drifted in and stumbled over his body. Callate someone stuck a knife in him right 'fore I arrived."

The human skeleton gave a laugh, a harsh, derisive sound. "That's a good one," he cackled. "Yuh jest arrived, huh? Yeah, jest in time to stab Sheriff Barr. And I got here jest in time to stick you. Unbuckle that gunbelt and let her drap; if yuh so much as wink I'll drill yuh."

Hatfield cleared his throat. The light in the office was bright and the deputy held him with a deadly bead, hand never shaking.

"Shad—hey, Slim Shad!" a man yelled from the cell-block and others began banging their bars.

"Shut up in there, I'm busy," shouted Slim Shad. He added, "I'll fetch yuh some grub in a jiffy, Cactus."

His voice had a harsh twang to it the Ranger did not fail to note. The narrow-set eyes flashed with rage; he was furious at Hatfield, and the bony thumb, second joint crooked on the hammer spur, itched to rise, to kill the big jigger who so coolly eyed him.

"Unbuckle and drap, I said," snarled Slim.

DEATH was here, an instant away, in the deputy's pistol, and Hatfield had no illusions as to Shad's character. The voice itself was too distinct to miss. He had heard it before, that very night, when he had snatched Judge Jeremiah Welles from the three gunmen who had tried to intimidate him and control his conduct on the Bench.

The Ranger undid the buckle of his gunbelt, smoothly talking, laying the seeds for his future investigation—if there should be any after Slim Shad finished with him.

"Yuh got me wrong, depitty. I'm a friend of Judge Welles, work for him as his bodyguard. We on'y pulled in a few minutes back. I wanted to ask the sheriff for a permit to tote a gun in town, 'case it's needed—some make yuh check yore hardware."

"I'll check it for yuh," Shad promised grimly. He wouldn't take his hard eyes off the Ranger for an instant. "Get yore paws back up to the ceilin'—that's yore knife stickin' in Barr, yuh murdered him. Swing, and march through that door behind yuh. I'm lockin' yuh up."

Hatfield, aware he was dealing with a crooked officer who had spoken of "inside" and powerful connections to

threaten Welles, did not give Slim the slightest pretext to shoot. He knew Shad might decide to kill him with no excuse, but held himself ready for a last desperate lunge that must prove helpless unless lightning struck Slim before he could fire.

"He got in here too quick," he mused. "Jest had time to run out the back way, when he heard me comin', and duck up front. Mebbe *he* stuck Barr."

He walked slowly, hands at shoulder level, to the cell block. When he entered the door he saw the half dozen square cubicles. There were men in four, pressing their faces against the steel bars, curious to see who was being brought in. They took in the tall Ranger.

The hombre in the nearest cell was small in body, though his head was overlarge, crowned by a mess of matted black hair. His forehead was low over shaggy brows; the nose curved, mouth twisted, showing yellow fangs. His mouth, the red glow in the eyes betrayed the virulency of his soul. He had taken off his boots for comfort and stood in bare feet.

The other three were Texans of an evil brand. Hatfield had seen plenty such in his experience as a law officer; they were run-of-the-mill killers, gunmen, the stamp of Cain on brutal faces.

"Here's company for yuh, Cactus," Slim Shad growled to the tiny man.

The virulent little devil laughed. "Look what the cat drug in, boys," he railed. "Welcome to our city, big feller. Got a vacant soote for yuh. Boy, fetch the gent's bags thisaway." He was evidently a wit among his mates for all laughed. Cactus Charlie vibrated with energy, dancing up and down.

HATFIELD nodded politely to Cactus Charlie, looking them all over, filing faces in his brain. Slim Shad, with his left hand, unhooked some keys from a belt swivel and threw them at Hatfield. "Unlock that last cell, mutt, and hop in. Lively, now."

A sudden silence fell, and the Ranger judged it aright, as he judged the understanding look which passed between the crooked deputy and Cactus Charlie.

Slim Shad was going to kill him, then and there, the Ranger knew it.

He bent easily to pick up the heavy iron ring with a dozen keys attached. He was forced into a play, and yet he had not the slightest chance to make one—

"Hey, Sheriff!" a voice called from the main office. "Anybody here?" It was a fresh young voice and seldom had Hatfield, aware of how hopeless escape was, heard anything more welcome for it gave him the diversion he had to have.

"Look out, Shad," shrieked Cactus Charlie.

The big jigger was in action. The bony deputy had instinctively looked over his shoulder at the hail from the rear. Hatfield, from a stooping position, hurled the heavy key ring at Shad's eyes and as Slim turned back, the metal struck square. Straightening his powerful legs, Hatfield launched himself through the air; the .45 in Slim Shad's hand exploded but the slug ranged through the Ranger's vest, he felt the sting on his skin as his left arm knocked up the rattled deputy's gun wrist.

"Damn yuh, I'll kill yuh for that!" gasped Slim, wind knocked out by the driving, powerful fist to his belly.

In an instant Hatfield ripped the gun from the skeleton fingers; he lifted the bony hombre easily, flung him bodily against the stone wall. Shad's head struck with a sharp crack and he crashed on the tiled floor, lay there in a grotesque heap, looking like a squashed giant spider.

The prisoners stared, open-mouthed, at the sudden swift conflict. Cactus Charlie cried, "Hey—Mr. Big Jigger, let us outa here, will yuh?"

But the Ranger feigned not to hear; he glided out to the office. And in the doorway to the corridor stood a good-looking young cowpuncher in wide brown Stetson and riding clothes.

"Howdy," the pleasant-voiced youth greeted. "My name's Jerry Farmon,

I'd like to speak to Sheriff Barr—what was that racket jest now?"

"Had a little fuss with a pris'ner," drawled Hatfield softly, watching him. He liked the m. n's appearance; he caught the troubled light in Farmon's clear eyes.

"Oh, yuh're another of Barr's depitties," conclued Farmon. "I'm new in these parts and don't know 'em all. Look, I was gunned agin today on Square A range. I must have help to find my pardner Bill Cole's body. I'm shore they kilt him."

"I'd like to hear yore story."

The sheriff's corpse, invisible from where Farmon stood, lay by the high desk. Hatfield stepped back to glance in at Slim Shad; the bony hombre lay as he had fallen.

"Callate yuh're wuth more to me alive than daid," he mused.

He again swung to Farmon, stepping closer; he wished to hear the waddy's complaint since every straw helped show the wind's direction. Leather creaking, the big Ranger moved to the rear door and noted how the spider web oscillated; there was a back chamber and beyond, a door into the side alley.

FARMON watched him curiously, and came farther inside the office. The tinkle of falling glass sent Hatfield gliding full-tilt to the cell-block; he was just in time to see Slim Shad's long legs disappear out a small, unbarred window up front, outside the block.

Shad, as soon as he landed, started to screech at the top of his lungs, "Murder—this way, boys! The sheriff's bin murdered. C'mon, the killer's inside."

The alarm spread with lightning rapidity. Armed men dashed from saloons, bunched toward the Town Hall. Jerry Farmon stared at the Ranger and a frown creased his brow.

"What goes on?" he demanded.

"Better get out," ordered Hatfield. "They may mistake yuh for a pal of mine and string yuh in the excitement."

He shoved Farmon through the back door. Even then, men were entering, egged on by Slim Shad.

Farmon went out into the dark sidepath but Hatfield paused to glance back into the lighted office. A huge hombre, wearing a ten-gallon Stetson of sandy hue, with a hoggish, brutal face, charged in. He had on crossed gunbelts from one holster of which he had drawn a six-shooter, gripped in a pudgy hand. The flesh around the small eyes crowded them and his nose was squashed flat over a thick-lipped mouth.

"He musta run out back, Piggy," yelled Slim.

Townsmen crowded in and the Ranger looked them over; they wore Stetsons the same color as Piggy's.

"Let's get him," shouted the giant Piggy, and with cocked pistol started for the back room on Hatfield's trail.

The Ranger slid out. Farmon awaited him in the shadows. "There he goes," yelped Shad, and the crash of guns smashed through the building, bullets rapping walls near the pair as Hatfield pushed Farmon ahead toward Tin Can Alley.

The lane behind the structures on Main was a disorderly array of stables, barns, outbuildings, piles of tin cans thrown out back doors, and trash. The dark bulk of a hay barn offered shelter and the Ranger took it.

"Quiet," he told Farmon, crouched by him. "They'll soon steam themselves out."

The mob came bursting along the alley, yelling, shooting at shadows. More and more men joined it. Piggy and Slim drove them on. A couple of citizens hurriedly peeked into the dark barn, but the Ranger and Jerry were behind a stall. The shouting people went on.

The coast temporarily clear, Hatfield went out, circled the barn and cut up between a narrow aisle to Main; Farmon stuck with him and they crossed to the shaded plaza. They could hear the shouts of the baffled mob.

Squatted under a great live oak, Hatfield satisfied Farmon's tentative inquiries: "I come to town with Jedge Welles. When I got to the jail, to speak to Sheriff Barr, I found him

daid. Slim Shad come in and accused me of killin' Barr."

Jerry Farmon shrugged. "That's that," he growled. "I been tryin' to get help to find my pardner, Bill Cole. The Square A vaqueros murdered him, I'm shore, and I mean to make 'em pay. But long as yuh're not a law officer, no use me tellin' yuh my troubles. S'long." He started away.

"Wait!" Hatfield's voice was easy but held a command. Farmon was instinctively drawn to the tall hombre, liked the way he moved, his coolness facing danger. Admiration was in the young puncher's face. "I've done some law work," the Ranger drawled. "Mebbe I can help yuh. My name's Jim Harris."

"Well, thanks, Jim. Ev'ry time those vaqueros spot me they gun and chase me, think I'm a spy for the townsmen. I got through once, and saw John Ambert and his lawyer and —Miss Ambert." Jerry paused, and pain crossed his young eyes. "She's —mighty purty, Jim, but cold and proud, awful bitter. Treated me like a dawg. I hate to fight a woman, and I won't, but I can buck her uncle and make him pay."

THE Ranger was silent; he sensed something that Farmon didn't yet realize himself, that the waddy had been wounded in the heart by the haughty Louise Ambert. He listened to Farmon's story. Then the tall jigger straightened up.

"Reckon I sleep outside town tonight, till they calm down," he said resignedly. "I'll ride to the Square A with yuh if yuh wish and we'll look around some in the mornin', near where yuh seen yore pal's piebald horse."

"Good. I'll fetch my mare. Meet yuh here in ten minutes, Jim."

The two young men, the Ranger with Goldy, Farmon with Sal, joined under the live-oak, and as they mounted, preparing to skirt the Fort and head for the vast stretches of the Square A, gunshots split the night air.

Mexican vaqueros came whirling around the Fort, shooting as they swept up Main Street.

Piggy Vorberg appeared, yelling orders to quickly assembling townsmen in their sand-colored Stetsons. Bullets flew as men took cover behind rain barrels and house sides; hoarse curses of rage punctuated the firing; the dark-skinned, masked vaqueros, in steeple hats of black, red-sashed, rode their wild mustangs that ran like the wind.

Hatfield, peering at the flashing band, made out the Square A brand on several nearer horses. They flew up Main, skirted the plaza, smashing windows and wounding a couple of citizens; but instead of turning and hurrahing back, they cut northwest and were lost in the velvet night.

"That's the sorta trick the Square A's bin pullin'," growled Farmon, shaking a fist after the vaqueros. "The hull country's roused up."

"Let's be ridin'," drawled Hatfield.

West under the stars the two young men rode. Farmon's scouting on previous visits, the Ranger's cunning on a trail, took them through mounted pickets who watched the main roads. They hid themselves in deep mesquite on a ridge near the east-and-west track, camping under the dome of heaven.

Head on saddle, the Ranger woke with a start, a few hours later, from a doze. His keen senses warned him and for a time he lay, head resting back on his long hands, listening for further sounds of whatever had disturbed him.

Farmon was breathing deeply, evenly. Then Hatfield heard a clacking noise—that was a stone rolling under a hoof, below on the trail.

An owl hooted twice, another replied. "Rusty," mused Hatfield.

He came up on his feet, started down toward the calls.

Men met myseriously in the night. Down there lurked death for the Ranger, the savage guns of desperate men against whom duty and high courage urged the Lone Wolf.

CHAPTER IV

Killers Meet

THE mesquite threw long shadows across two bunches of men, from east and west, who came together on the road to the Square A hacienda. A small hombre, among the eastern group, pushed out and saluted the man in the lead of the other party.

"Here we are, Chief. Slim let us go. He hadda knife Barr when the sheriff caught him unlockin' our gates."

The man addressed as Chief wore a Mexican cape that draped shapelessly about him as he slouched in his saddle, chin in the collar folds. The peaked sombrero on his head was pulled down so his face was a black burr, just the curved lip line visible. When he spoke his mouth snapped open and shut like a rat trap, words a deep snarl.

"The fool! Suppose he's caught? Why didn't he obey my orders and get to that circuit judge? There's more to it than just you men."

"He tried. But the jedge had a bodyguard along who kilt Whitey and Dave, and Shad hadda run for it."

"A bodyguard! Why should a circuit magistrate have a guard with him. Who was it?"

"Some great big jigger, I seen him. He come to the jail later to talk to Barr, and Shad was near caught jest as he stabbed Barr. Slim slipped round back and come up behind this hombre."

"Good! Did he kill him?"

"No, sir! Slim was lucky that big mutt didn't finish him. I never seen anybuddy as quick."

"Why should a judge's bodyguard visit the county sheriff the minute he got in? Sounds fishy."

"Dunno. But I seen him in action, Chief, and he's one tough sidewinder."

"H'm. Belfort must be handled carefully, it's the hub of the situation. There mustn't be any more mistakes. I wanted Slim to run for sheriff in the election but if this judge should recognize him as the man who attacked him there'll be hell to pay. And then, I need a magistrate I can control. This bodyguard may be a spy, an investigator, even a Ranger."

"Mebbe—what yuh want us to do?"

"You can't ride around town any more. I have an idea how I'll use you, Charlie. Lie up in the bush a day or so and I'll let you—" He broke off, his hand whipped out from under the black cape. Moonlight glinted on the nickel trimmings of the pistol in his hand.

"Someone on that ridge," he said hoarsely. "Spread out, quick now."

The gunmen immediately sprang into action; a nervous one fired at a shadow and the whole gang blasted the mesquite with a murderous hail of lead.

JIM HATFIELD, who had crept up in time to hear the Chief's gruff threat against himself, had heard, too, the shrill whinny of Jerry Farmon's mare. Sal was not so well-trained as was Goldy and the scent of other horses below had caused her to call out.

Slugs rattled around him as he faded back through the chaparral. The gunmen yelled, charging the thickets, but, dismounted, the Ranger could move more swiftly in the tangled masses of the bush.

"There he goes—so help me, it's that big jigger!" shrieked Cactus Charlie, glimpsing the tall Ranger as the officer flitted across an open space.

Bullets drove into the rocky dirt inches behind Hatfield; he swung to puncture the gunmen line intent on killing him. His accurate shooting knocked two from their saddles; their yelps of pain made the others hesitate.

"Dismount! Go in and get him!" roared the dark-cloaked Chief.

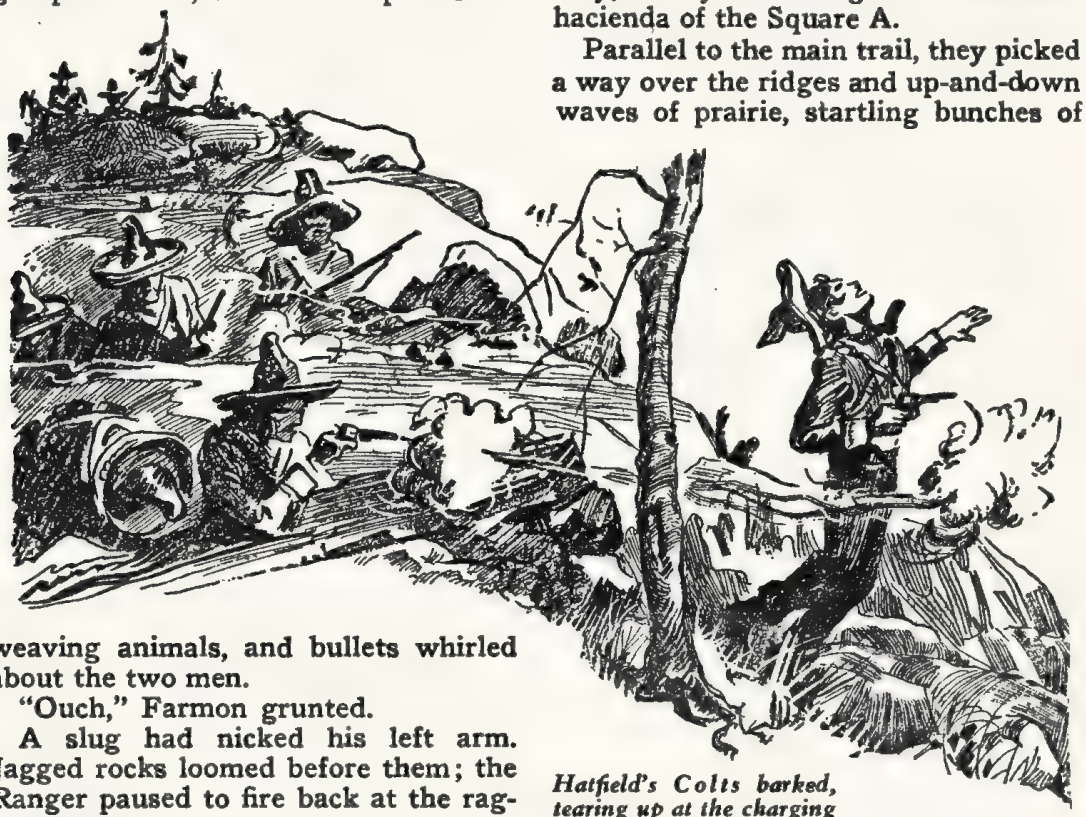
Cactus Charlie and his mates, whom Slim Shad had evidently released from Belfort jail, were in the van; others, ferocious faces set, leaped from their mounts and tore through the mesquite on the tall officer's trail.

Hatfield was mainly concerned about Jerry Farmon. When he scrambled up to the ridge top he found Farmon erect, holding the reins of Sal and Goldy, alert and ready to go. The shooting had roused him.

"Down the other side," ordered the Ranger. "Don't shoot 'less they get

close."

They pushed through the thickets of the south slope, leading their horses. The pursuers, coming to the ridge crest, glimpsed them, the dark shapes of the



Hatfield's Colts barked, tearing up at the charging line (Chap. IV)

weaving animals, and bullets whirled about the two men.

"Ouch," Farmon grunted.

A slug had nicked his left arm. Jagged rocks loomed before them; the Ranger paused to fire back at the raging gunmen.

"I'll hold 'em here. Take a peek round that butte and see if we kin ride beyond," ordered Hatfield.

His two Colts barking, tearing up at the charging line, cooled some of their ardor. Hatfield made three hits and they paused, flattened out for a duel. The fight blared in the night, smashing explosions reverberating from the rocks.

Farmon hurried back around the red butte. "It's clear enough beyond, Jim."

Emptying a six-shooter at the yellow flares of enemy guns, the Ranger ducked behind the butte, leaped to the saddle. Iron thighs locked on the golden gelding ribs, as they cut down a rocky slope and crossed a rill onto a sagebrush plain across which they easily left behind the dismounted minions of the Chief.

They found another camping spot and slept, nerves untroubled by the narrow squeak, till the redness of dawn roused them. Eating from saddlebags, drinking from the crystal rill, they mounted and, scouting the western way, slowly headed again for the main hacienda of the Square A.

Parallel to the main trail, they picked a way over the ridges and up-and-down waves of prairie, startling bunches of cattle. They saw two bands of Square A mustangs running with high tails in retreat. The range was tremendous, a veritable empire. A man could ride for days and never cover the Square A.

IN the sky the sudden dropping black specks to their right, not far off the east-and-west trail to the hacienda, caught the Ranger's trained eye. They increased in size till they were large vultures. Hatfield watched the scavengers and his keen ear caught the barking, complaining yelp of coyotes.

"Wonder what they're after," he said aloud.

"Dead calf, I reckon, what some cougar left after a kill. Or, mebbe, one of them gunmen yuh shot last night."

"That was further back. Reckon the Chief, whoever he is, would see to it they toted off the bodies. Might be a daid horse or cow but to be shore we'll

jest sashay over and have a peek."

"Yuh don't miss much, do yuh?" remarked Jerry.

The Ranger didn't answer. He knew the value of details. That moving spider web, back at Belfort jail, had warned him Slim Shad had probably stabbed Sheriff Tom Barr.

It wasn't far out of their way, and only a hundred yards south of the main trail, which Hatfield checked as clear before proceeding with his investigation. He easily found the big sand hill where the vultures and coyotes feasted.

Farmon set his teeth with horror. The coyotes slunk off at once, at man's approach, growling complaints, but the ribald vultures waited till the horses almost stepped on them before flapping up with raucous cries at being interrupted.

Goldy sniffed nervously, pawing sand. Ranger Hatfield dismounted, went to the freshly disturbed sand bank.

"Dead man," Hatfield called back to Farmon. "Gone some weeks though the coyotes jest dug him out. Shot through the heart at close range and buried in the sand."

He stooped by the corpse. "Huh," Farmon heard him grunt. The waddy watched and the Ranger held up a wide brown gunbelt studded with gold half-moon conchas.

"Hell!" shouted Farmon, throwing himself from Sal's back, running to Hatfield's side. "Jim, that's Bill Cole's gunbelt, my pardner!" Quickly he looked over the sad remains. "That's Cole, awright."

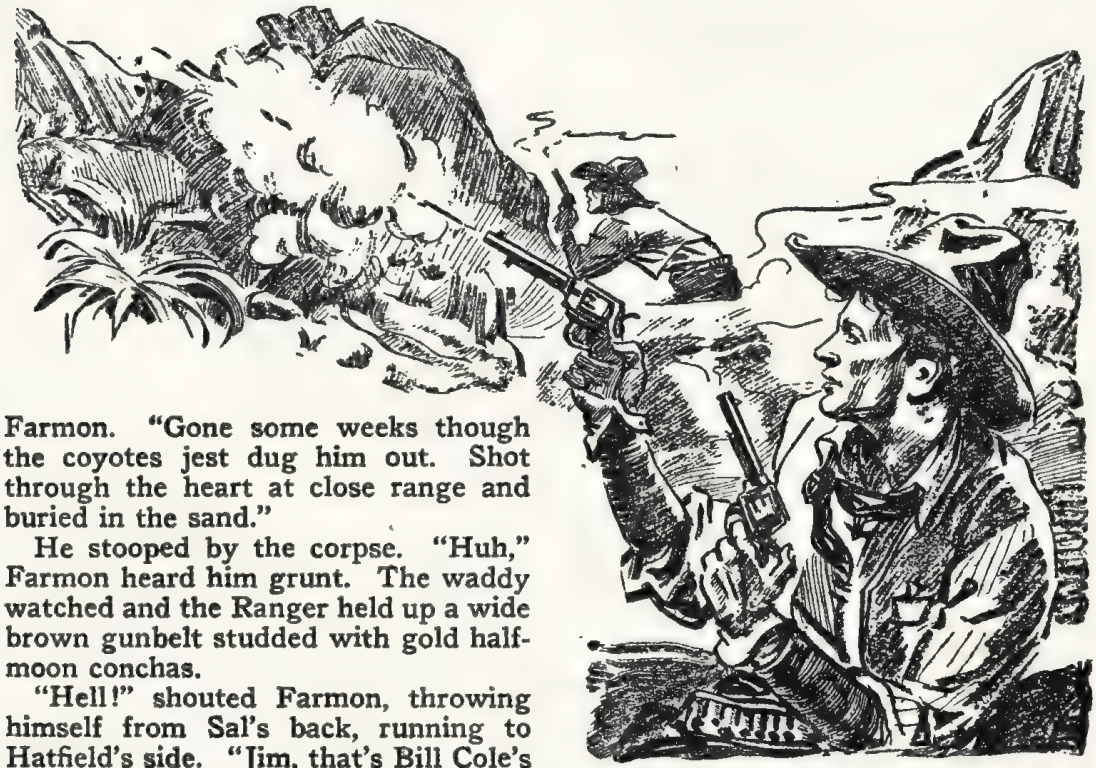
Hatfield was sifting through the belongings. "Pair of handcuffs attached to the belt—and here's a loose pair! Funny he'd be carryin' two."

"He didn't, not that I knowed of. Some of them clothes never belonged to Cole," growled Farmon, bracing himself at the shock of finding his pal's corpse. "Why, Cole never wore Eastern shoes like those!"

Hatfield carefully examined the muddy, torn boots. There was a stained coat and pants and he ticketed all the details in his memory.

As he yanked at a dirt-encrusted coat, more sand slid down, and exposed the remains of a second body, from which the clothing had also been removed. There were no clues as to its identity; decomposition had advanced to a far stage and the Ranger could only say the second dead man had been about five-feet-ten in height and had light hair, streaked with silver.

They gave the bodies decent burials, heaped rocks over them in a cairn so they could again find them. The sun was white, and hot, as they started on



after their gruesome task.

FARMON'S chin was sunk on his chest in dejection. "Somehow," he growled, "I kept hopin' I was wrong,

Jim, that I'd find Bill alive. I aim to git the sidewinders who kilt him!"

"Watch it — some vaqueros over north."

They swung south, behind a ridge, out of sight of Square A men busy with a bunch of beeves.

The fast horses vied with one another for the lead, as the miles passed under the clopping hoofs.

"There's the main spread," Farmon announced suddenly. "And that's Miss Ambert, ridin' acrost the valley!"

The great hacienda had a peaceful look of pastoral activity. A bronc buster, a magnificently clad vaquero, was at work, skillfully taming wild mustangs in a great corral; hay barns, smoke sheds and cribs, long bunkhouses, looked domestic, innocent of harm. A village for married workers, of adobe bricks, with women and children around, was set to the southwest of the gleaming white hacienda which had square turrets at the four corners, spaced with loopholes like a fort's.

"Yuh really mean to ride down there?" asked Farmon.

"Shore! Why not?"

"Why? 'Cause they got three, four hundred Mexes armed to the teeth, who'd kill us with pleasure; I'm certain of that now, since we found Cole. And they promised me hell if they caught me on the ranch agin."

"They didn't kill yuh, did they, though they was convinced yuh was a spy come to harm 'em? If they're honest they'll listen to us; if they ain't, we want to know it."

Farmon gave a short laugh. "Funny. I was the one wished to come here. Yuh was to help me but we've got turned round, thanks to yore nerve and savvy. So I'm with yuh, Jim, no matter where yuh go or what turns out. Yuh wish to do the palaverin'?"

"Yuh start it, I'll chime in. Tell 'em yuh found Cole's body and ask what they mean to do."

The long, delicately tuned hand felt the black-holstered Colts, checking them by sense of touch, as the Ranger shoved Goldy into the van and cut down the slope to intercept the young mistress of the Square A empire.

The two were spied from the ranch; shrill yells rose on the sweet, mellow air. Vaqueros quit what they were doing, grabbed up rifles, seized mustangs from corrals and, not pausing to saddle, leaped on bareback and tore at mad speed to get between the approaching pair and Louise Ambert.

Shots began to whistle over Hatfield and Farmon.

"See, they're gunnin' us!" cried Jerry.

"On'y warnin' shots." The Ranger raised his hand in the universal gesture of peace, high over his straight-set Stetson.

Miss Ambert saw him, halted and turned her milk-white blooded horse. Across her proud young face flashed admiration for the magnificent figure of the rugged Ranger. An expert judge of a rider, she did not miss the expert skill of Jim Hatfield and no one could look on the Lone Wolf without thrilling to the man's inherent power.

Her blue eyes went past Hatfield, to Jerry Farmon, and her gaze cooled. She bit her full red lip.

The excited vaqueros, in their steeple-crowned, hairy black hats trimmed with silver A's that caught the late afternoon sun, drove on, but Hatfield beat them to the young woman. He gravely saluted her:

"Afternoon, ma'am. We're here for a straight talk with yuh. We don't mean to hurt anybuddy, if we can help it."

THE dark-blue eyes widened in surprise; then amusement came to them. She waved toward the oncoming, ravening Mexicans, her retainers, bristling with weapons. "I believe we're the ones to talk of that," she said coolly.

"Yes ma'am," agreed the Ranger mildly. "Mebbe yuh'll order yore men to stay back."

The tall Fernando, handsome face set in fury, led the pack. In Spanish he shouted, whirling straight at the Ranger, *"Mueran los gringos!"* Kill the gringos.

Miss Ambert hesitated; then she turned in her saddle, put up a commanding hand. Fernando brought his black stallion to a sliding stop, dust

clouding up from digging hoofs; behind him, his gang piled up in a whooping mêlée.

Fernando scowled, white teeth gritted behind his curled lip. He swept the sombrero, tinkling with its conchas, from his sleek head, oiled to perfect order.

"The señorita," he inquired, "wishes me to throw these men off her land?" The narrowed black eyes had recognized Jerry Farmon; he took in the Lone Wolf, who watched him, eyes lazily half-veiled.

"No thanks, Fernando," replied Louise. "Not just yet, anyway. They evidently have something to say to me. And we're not like other Texans in these parts; we believe in hearing complaints and dealing out justice."

Hatfield sensed the deep hurt behind her sarcasm, a heart-aching misery at wrong done. He gave a quick nod to Farmon, who took off his hat and spoke:

"Miss Ambert, I'm sorry I come bustin' in on yuh that way the other night, but I was bothered, thinkin' my pardner Bill Cole was daid. I'm no spy, I live up nawth, in Lenox, far off from here. Today, Jim Harris here and I found Cole's body on yore range; he was shot daid and that's what I come to tell yuh."

Her lips firmed. "Fernando," she said. "You heard. Do you or any of your men know about this?"

"No, Señorita Ambert. We have killed none save in self-defense."

Louise spoke gravely, to Farmon: "Our ranch is very large. It may be your friend was killed on our land but if any of my men did it, then he must have attacked them first. We've only defended ourselves."

Hatfield looked straight at the pretty girl. "How 'bout these night riders, ma'am, who've been hittin' the towns round yore borders? Ain't that stretchin' self-defense some?"

Color tinged the golden-hued cheeks. Fernando gave a sibilant hiss, hand itching toward the knife at the studded, wide belt. The vaqueros muttered angrily, pressing in.

The Ranger still watched Louise as she cried, "None of our men have attacked the towns. We have enemies, sir, who have spread these lies about us—" She stopped, eyes leaving Hatfield.

THE two intruders looked with her, toward the great white castle. A bunch of riders headed at them. The saturnine John Ambert and his attorney, Martin Bond, with several more retainers, were coming. The fattish young George Pennock was present, too.

Ambert pushed through the lane opened for him to Louise. He scowled at Farmon, at Hatfield. "What are these men doing here, Louise?" he demanded harshly.

"Mr. Farmon claims to have found his partner's body on our range," she answered.

Jim Hatfield took in the deep-set bitter eyes, the eagle nose, the severe mouth of John Ambert. A clever hombre, he thought, deep-thinking, of great force. He looked over the distinguished, blond-headed Martin Bond, who was eyeing the stalwart officer with open admiration.

"And what," demanded Ambert, "has that to do with us? The range is swarming with rascals and so are the towns."

"John," Martin Bond remarked, "it's best to try to satisfy these men."

Ambert shrugged. "I suppose so, if they mean what they say, I'll talk to them later on. Louise, the four killers, among them Cactus Charlie, whom we turned over to the authorities, have been freed. Sheriff Barr was murdered last night. They say the prisoners escaped, but I don't doubt they were let go."

Louise gave a sharp cry. "Then—you're right, Uncle Jack, there's no justice for the Square A."

Amber was livid with rage. "We'll fight," he told her, between gritted teeth, "as I said at the start. I'll bring in a thousand men if I have to."

Martin Bond pressed close to his employer, whispered to him. The saturnine man sought to restrain his rage, muttering, "Yes, I'll stay inside the law—if they'll let me, damn them!"

"I'm still busy with the local land records on which your titles are based, John," Bond said, "but maybe I'd better go to Austin and see the Governor."

"I'll go," Ambert replied. "He's a personal friend of mine."

George Pennock put in his oar: "My father, Commissioner Pennock, will be glad to help yuh all he can, Ambert." The stout youth was scowling at Farmon, but as Jerry edged toward him, he danced his horse to the other side.

Louise was deeply troubled; she stared at her uncle, saying, "But if they're so high-handed about freeing murderers, there's no telling what they'll do at the election next week. Suppose they make that horrible Slim Shad sheriff in Barr's place?"

"They can't," Bond said, "they won't control enough votes. The Square A has many friends, and most of your men are American citizens, entitled to vote."

Ambert nodded. "Yes, we should carry Terrell County, at least. The faction in Belford can't stop us at the polls unless they use force. If they try that, we'll shoot our way in."

JOHN AMBERT was deeply troubled; he had been under strain a long while.

Hatfield listened to the talk. The election was due in a few days and he understood the importance to the Square A of putting in officials at least impartial.

Bond caught the gray-green gleam of the tall man's eyes, and nudged Ambert, who swung and said, "Gentlemen, come to the house for supper. We'll speak more about this Cole's death, though I don't see how you can lay blame at our door."

Farmon glanced inquiringly at his new friend, who flicked Goldy's rein and rode in front beside Bond and Ambert.

The dying sun bathed the range in blood-red hue, symbolic of the terror claiming the mighty land. It set off the fierce faces of the fighting vaqueros who would lay down their lives for their boss.

George Pennock tried to push his horse beside Louise's but Jerry Farmon, handling Sal with his knee, cut him off. Sal knocked the fat youth's mount out of the way.

"Hey, yuh!" growled Pennock, but the look in Farmon's eye stopped his complaint; grumbling, he swung off to the flank. The vaqueros were muttering, too, casting angry looks at Hatfield and Farmon.

Dinner was served soon after they came to the house, in a great dining-hall, by Mexican servants. Jim Hatfield ate with hearty relish, unperturbed by the restless Latin eyes that watched the two suspicious strangers. They were ready to protect the Amberts.

John Ambert asked the big man a few polite questions; Hatfield parried his curiosity by saying he was Farmon's pal.

George Pennock, sitting on the other side of Miss Ambert, was sullen, for Farmon held her attention.

Halfway through the elaborate meal, a peon came in, crossed to Ambert, bent to whisper in his ear; the Square A boss quickly excused himself, went outside. After a few minutes he came back, resumed the conversation.

The dinner was finished. They all retired to the big front chamber to smoke; Ambert spoke about the trouble the Square A was undergoing.

Through the front door, out of the darkness, stepped a huge Mexican, a man with big guns strapped at his barrel waist. He had a handsome, broad face, adorned with a flowing black mustache, and he moved with a panther's sinuous slouch.

He swept the fancy sombrero from his large head, bowed to the floor before Miss Ambert.

"Señorita! señores!"

A vaquero walked behind this personage. The huge Mexican said in Spanish, "Manuel, point out the man to me."

Manuel pointed a brown forefinger straight at Jim Hatfield.

The giant's face tightened. "Señor," he said, politely cold, "I am Captain Juan Mireles of the Mexican State Police. You are undaire arres' for the murdaire of Shereef Barr of Belfort!"

CHAPTER V

Rurale Blood

JERRY FARMON, close to Louise Ambert, cutting the furious George Pennock out, was rudely awakened from his short-lived happiness by the bombshell the rurale captain threw into the party.

George Pennock suddenly guffawed, slapping his thigh in delight. "That's a good one," he cried. "Ha, ha, Captain! Yuh better take the other one, too. They're birds of a feather."

"Dry up, Pennock," snarled Farmon.

John Ambert was staring sternly at Hatfield, who sat there, watching Mireles.

"Manuel," Ambert explained triumphantly, "was in Belfort last night, as a scout for us. He told me he saw you there, Harris or whatever your name may be. Captain Mireles rode to ask if he could help us; he was nearby. I waited till we had finished our meal, of course. I don't know what your dirty game is, Harris, but Tom Barr was a decent man and a friend of mine."

Farmon felt a surge of anger, indignation, at the way his big pal had been trapped. "It's a lie," he cried, leaping up so suddenly his chair toppled over backward.

Mireles whipped out a six-shooter with the dexterity that comes only with long years of practice and a natural gift for handling weapons. He had Farmon covered and the gun needed to sweep but a scant yard to drill Hatfield.

"Careful, señor," growled Mireles. "One more move like that and you die. I theenk you go for gun."

"But you got to listen," said Farmon earnestly. "Jim didn't kill Barr."

"How do you know?" demanded Ambert.

"Well—I jest know he didn't. He ain't that kind."

"He's an old friend of yours, then?"

"Well—no. I met him last night when I stepped into Barr's office.

The Ranger landed on the Mexican (Chap. VII)

Barr was dead and—" Farmon broke off, stammering in confusion. He recalled that Jim had been standing there and Barr lay knifed by the desk. He knew his big pal could have had nothing to do with such a terrible murder, but the more he said, the worse it seemed for Jim.

Ambert was holding in his rage. Now it burst out as he accusingly pointed at Hatfield.

"You may fool this young man, sir," he cried, "but you can't fool me any longer! You killed Barr for Vorberg's ring in Belfort and used Farmon to gain an entry here. Perhaps to kill me. You're a spy."

"Both of 'em are," growled Pennock.

Farmon, face hotly burning, heard his friend drawl, "Yeah, I am a spy, Ambert. But not the sort yuh figger. I'm workin' for Jedge Jeremiah Welles, who's in Belfort to hold court and restore order. Ask him 'bout me."

Captain Mireles laughed musically; when he shifted, his conchas tinkled gaily. "Rise up, señor. You ride weeth me, pronto. I tak' you in, hand you ovair to the shereef and the judge, too."

JERRY FARMON was greatly perturbed, fearing a return to Belfort might mean a lynching at the hands of the hot-headed mob for Jim. He stared at the set face of the big rurale and missed the warning glance Hatfield gave him.

Now Hatfield talked, easily, to Mireles. "Yuh're quite a ways from yore line, ain't yuh, Cap'n? This is Texas, not Mexico. Seems like yuh oughta leave arrestin' to Texas lawmen."

The smile on the giant Mex's face seemed carved there; the dark-hued cheeks never twitched. The long eyes were half shut as he carefully observed the tall jigger who sat so quietly in his seat, long hands relaxed on the table before him, in plain sight.

Farmon agonizedly blamed himself; it was his fault Jim was here, at the Square A. Jim had come on his business, about Cole, even though he said he was the judge's man.

The air of the room was tense as a strung wire. Bond, Ambert and Louise, Pennock, were watching the two big men who confronted one another.

"Murder," Mireles said between clenched teeth, "is a matter that interests all men, señor. You weel rise, unbuckle your gunbelt, walk outside weeth hands up. Pronto, now." His tone changed from dulcet sweetness to sudden harshness: "Come—or I shoot!"

No doubt the rurale meant it. And Farmon made his decision. The tension snapped with the speed of striking lightning as Farmon whirled on Mireles, his gun whipping out and up; he meant to get the drop on the giant Mexican, force him to let Jim go free.

Mireles fired, gun barrel flicking with his supple, trained wrist. Farmon took the heavy bullet through the left arm; it missed by inches his heart, but the stunning shock spun him around and he sank to his knees, pistol thudding on the mat as he lost his volition.

The giant Mex's wrist again flicked, the Colt boomed a second time. A ruby glow, an animal light, burned the black eyes, white teeth hard gritted. He had taken Farmon's play as an excuse to kill Hatfield and his slug rapped between the spread feet of the Lone Wolf's chair.

Hatfield still sat at the table but his right hand was no longer beside his left. It held a blue-steel Colt he had fired from a sitting position, just a second-fraction after Mireles had nicked Farmon and turned to kill the Ranger.

The action was so fast that it was over before a breath could be fully drawn. The giant Mexican stood like a statue for an instant, a vacuous, surprised expression on his wide brown face.

Louise Ambert uttered a pent-up scream that tore at the nerves of the men in the room.

The big rurale folded up where he stood, blue-red bullet hole showing between fading eyes.

"Stop, stop it!" gasped Martin Bond, lips twitching.

JOHN AMBERT swore hotly, started across the room, always watching the tall jigger. The taut Square A boss took a stand close to his niece. Pennock gulped in fright, green around the gills, shrank as though he expected to be next.

Farmon's head cleared but he felt weak; he realized Louise was kneeling by him. "Are you badly hurt?" she murmured. The pity in her eyes no longer haughty, touched him deeply, more than repaid him for his wound.

She touched him and her soft hand sent a thrill through the young man. "I'm okay—jest nicked."

Hatfield was up now. The hombre's gray-green eyes flicked from side to side. The shooting was an alarm, and Square A vaqueros were approaching the scene, their excited voices raised.

"That—that was murder, sir," Ambert cried.

The tall man was cool as Fate. Jerry heard him drawl, "That was self-defense. Ask yore lawyer."

Bond cleared his throat, shook himself, as though returning from a daze. "Yes," he cried, "he's right, John. What do you want us to do now, Harris?"

He seemed to comprehend the mastery of the tall jigger, that the blue-steel Colt held them in its power and whatever the wielder of it desired they must accept.

Vaqueros were up on the porch. Farmon, sitting up, shaking himself, saw his friend back against the blank wall.

"Order yore men away, Ambert," said Hatfield quietly. "I won't hurt anybuddy 'less I hafta. We'll be ridin' C'mon, Farmon."

"You'd better stay here and let me tend that wound," said Louise.

Farmon was up, a little shaky; he looked into her eyes, and they were kind, sympathetic. "I better ride," he muttered. In a low voice he added, "I'll be back. I got to stick with him, ma'am."

Her eyes lost their soft appeal; she seemed to withdraw into her haughty shell. The shooting of the rurale had set her against Jim Harris.

"Stay back, men," Ambert shouted, to Fernando and his vaqueros.

BOND waved a hand toward the angry Mexicans, who crowded to the door, staring at the dead Mireles.

"Have 'em tote that out, a couple of 'em," drawled Hatfield. "I'll take it along and save yuh the trouble of diggin' a hole, Ambert."

Ambert shrugged; at his curt command, peons carried the dead man outside and fastened the body over the saddle of Mireles's black mustang. Goldy and Sal were ready.

Silence was on the gathering as the big jigger and Farmon mounted. At his pal's command, Farmon took the reins of the big black and started off, out of the light circle.

"See yuh agin, Ambert," he heard Jim Hatfield say earnestly.

"I hope not," the Square A boss replied bitterly.

Then the hombre he knew as Jim Harris trotted up beside the retreating Farmon. Back there, in the light area stood the armed vaqueros of the Square A, staring out into the darkness where the riders had disappeared.

"Jim, Jim," growled Farmon, "I didn't like that—I mean, shootin' this law officer. Did yuh hafta kill him?"

The eyes gleamed toward him, cold as an Arctic sea. "No, I didn't hafta, Farmon. But he meant to kill me and I callate it was fair enough."

"Oh, it was a fair fight, yuh give him the break," agreed Farmon. He decided he had said all he would on the matter; he was willing to follow his friend to the end and talk did no good.

For a time the only sound that broke the quiet was the clop-clop of hoofs as they rode south down the valley. "We ain't headin' for Belfort, Jim," objected Farmon. "This way'll take us to Mexico."

His pal didn't answer that, but asked, "How yuh feel?"

"Okay. Wound burns some but it won't stop me."

"I better take a look. A bandage won't hurt none."

They paused, on a moonlit rise;

dark mesquite shadows splotched the slope to the east, the aromatic scent of the plants was fresh, clean, invigorating.

When the wound was dressed, the big man displaying a surprising gentleness and aptitude about it, they remounted and rode on. Suddenly the tall hombre pulled up, gave Farmon a warning click.

"Keep yore horse quiet," he whispered.

A moment later Farmon, too, heard the thud of a hundred hoofs, swift on their trail. Looking back, and down the slope, his heart jumped. Across the moonlit flat came galloping a big band of vaqueros, in the peaked hats favored by the Square A.

"They're after us, Jim," he gasped. "A hundred of 'em!"

"Up on the ridge, quick," ordered his pal.

A few spurts of the horses took them to high ground. Rapidly the wild-riding Mexes swept toward them. Flankers spread out, to sweep them into a great human net if they hid among bushes and rocks; there was no good cover at hand they might use to make a desperate stand.

BULLETS were whipping up at them and Farmon, angled around in his saddle as he rode, gave a yip as a slug tore through the thick felt of his hat, ripped his scalp. He felt the warm blood spurting from the lacerated flesh as he saw a million stars.

"I'm blind"—he muttered. "Can't see—" but it was only the blood dripping into his eyes and he wiped it away with the back of his hand.

Sal, his mare, madly excited by the roaring bullets, began to dance nervously, so Farmon nearly lost his seat. His friend was near him, asking, "How bad yuh hit?"

"Nuthin' but a scalp wound," gasped Farmon, ashamed of his weakness.

The big man made his decision in a second-fraction—all the time he had, for the whooping vaqueros of death were driving at them with the irresistible surge of a tidal wave.

"Get goin'," Jim ordered, in a voice that allowed Farmon no choice. "Cross the ridge and ride hell-for-leather straight east, savvy? Meet yuh in Belfort."

He snatched the reins of Mireles's mustang out of Jerry's limp hand, kicked a spur out at Sal, starting the mare off through the chaparral, out of the fray, a way she was glad enough to take.

Farmon saw, as he cast a last look back over his shoulder, and knew that he must obey or hamper Jim Harris. He realized that if he did not, both of them would be slaughtered. He took a long look as the tall jigger swung downhill straight at the oncoming vaqueros.

Farmon did not want to desert, but he dared not disobey that incisive command. He hit the ridge top, crowned with high mesquite, and rode out of sight.

Two minutes later he heard a terrific volley that shattered the peace of the balmy night, and shrill whoops of triumph.

"Did they get him?" he muttered agonizedly, half-minded to return.

He slowed Sal, the whole world seemed to be revolving insanely about him and his ears roared with pounding that deafened him; he found again he was blind, from blood oozing from the scalp wound, and sickness clutched the pit of his stomach.

"I'll fall off if I ride much further," he told himself, trying to clear his vision of that viscous fluid.

Unsteady in his seat he felt weakness overcoming him. He rode on, teeth gritted, Sal taking the easiest course north along the eastern slope of the ridge.

Both hands gripped the horn, damp with his blood. The shock of the wound Mireles had dealt him, coupled with loss of blood and the nearness to his brain of the head injury, finished him. His chin hit his chest, legs relaxed and he slumped forward, but instinctively still kept his hands on the horn.

Sal slowed, dropped her head, after a look around at her silent master. She began to crop grass, slowly stepping on from spot to spot. Then to the west she heard other horses; oats

and hay odors came to her animal sense on the gentle breeze, too, and attracted by her kind and food, she wandered toward the lighted hacienda of the Square A.

A Mexican stepped from the darkness near a bunkhouse, a rifle leveled. It was Fernando and his teeth gleamed as he growled, trigger clicking to full cock.

"Throw up your hands!"

"Fernando, it's the gringo who was with the big señor," said another vaquero in liquid Spanish.

Fernando laughed, none too pleasantly. "So it is. Now we have him. Hurry, Pedro, lift him down, tie his hands. He'll answer to the chief."

Jerry Farmon did not even know he was a prisoner.

CHAPTER VI

The Vaqueros of Doom

JIM HATFIELD, wide mouth stern, headed for the vaqueros of death.

Behind him, Farmon rode from the fray; the waddy was hurt and the Ranger knew that to be slowed in the least would mean death to both of them. He chose to divert the attackers, thus giving Farmon a chance to escape.

As it was, they glimpsed Farmon against the moonsky as he topped the ridge, and set up a howl of fury. They swung to shoot up at him as he dropped out of their vision.

But the Ranger stood between them and their prey. He paused behind a clump of high, gnarled mesquite, drew both Colts, blasted the line, stinging them to murder frenzy. He hit three, one taking the burning lead in a fatal spot, crashing from his horse.

Pain shrieks rose on the night air. "O-w-w, o-w-w!" The screech suddenly stopped.

The Ranger's gray-green eyes widened in surprise. "He don't yell right, he mused.

But he had no time to ponder this question; it was possible Texans rode with the Mexicans. He grasped the moments, gaining time for Farmon to escape.

The big black, the corpse of Mireles tide to his saddle, swung around at Hatfield's yank on the lead-rein. He gave the beast a sharp spur dig, and the horse darted south down the ridge like an arrow from a bow, across the path of the charging killers.

A tiny vaquero, evil face smudged with a black mustache, eyes gleaming ferociously, shrieked in Spanish, "There he goes, that's our man, the big one!"

The answering chorus to the Ranger's aria of death was diverted from Hatfield's mesquite clump to the flashing black horse; the mob swung in pursuit while Hatfield edged Goldy to the north side of the bushes and cut back along the ridge.

A short distance above, a coulee cut the ridge line, a bush-filled depression into which the sorrel dropped, the Ranger's body sharply angled to the back of the horse.

Goldy gave a quick sniff, of warning. "Steers, huh," muttered the rider.

The dark bodies of big Square A cows, their eyes shining as they regarded the horseman, blocked his way out of the draw. It was a good-sized bunch of steers; some were lying down, others stood with raised black muzzles as the rider came down among them from the height. They began to shift, snorting, drawing off, but Goldy was too expert a cowhorse and the Ranger too much of a hand with cows to alarm them unduly.

To the south he could hear disappointed yelps of vaqueros as they shot down the black and found Mireles's body tied to the animal's back.

Callate they'll head back pronto," he mused. "I got to have a look-see at that one I plugged."

THE sheer, cold audacity of Jim Hatfield in the face of overwhelming odds was what had so often brought him through in his dangerous missions. He meant, now, to ride back, straight at the hundred who

sought him to kill him.

At a knee signal, the clever sorrel started to work, edging bit by bit around the herd, at the same time forming them into a compact bunch for driving. Within a couple of minutes the cattle were well started, two hunderd horned beasts. Goldy headed them out of the draw in which they had gathered for the night; the sorrel wove his way this way and that, only a gentle knee pressure now and then telling him what to do. He shunted the leaders south, swinging them down the narrow valley.

With a rapid, even tempo of acceleration, that held them together, the golden sorrel and his master stampeded the steers and the horseman began yipping, a shrill challenge that penetrated above the thundering hoofs.

Hearing his cries of defiance, the vaqueros hurried, straight north in the constricted gap. Whooping the steers on, Hatfield saw the corpse in the moonlight, gleaming dark face, teeth clenched in death, peaked sombrero strapped on—a vaquero he had knocked over in the quick brush on the slope.

Hoofs spurned the body, then the steers were past, tails high, horns set dead ahead.

Dust rolled blindingly up from sharp hoofs. Further to excite the cows, so there would be no pause, the Ranger fired a blast from his Colt over the running herd.

Then he drew up, returned to the vaquero's body, leaped to the earth. Kneeling by the corpse, he noted the Square A's decorating the hat, the crimson sash. The skin was brown—

The Ranger rolled him on his back, struck a match in choking dust, cupping it in a big palm. Beyond, the startled cries of men rose as suddenly they faced a maddened herd of tons of charging beef, a juggernaut upon them.

Hatfield stared at the twisted face. With the black peaked sombrero off, the man didn't look so much like a Mexican; those yelps the Ranger heard when bullets drove into the dead one's body had betrayed him to Hatfield. And the palm of the tall jigger's hand was now stained brown, after touching the dead man's skin, the hair was light.

"Seen yuh before," the Ranger grunted and took a closer look.

Yes, he had seen this fellow before. He was one of Cactus Charlie's mates who had been in a cell at Belfort jail, and released, no doubt, by Slim Shad.

The crazed steers had smashed the formation of the gunmen, scattered them to one flank or the other, as they sought to elude the sharp horns and heavy bodies of the galloping animals. Hatfield seized the minutes he had gained to leap on Goldy, cut north up the valley, back toward the Square A hacienda.

He sought a spot to hide, found one among giant boulders thrown down from a red cliff on his right, farther up the valley. Over shale that would leave no sign he led the sorrel and waited.

Twenty minutes later he heard the army of killers riding past. Peering out from behind the rocks, he noted the slight vaquero who led them, and, his suspicion aroused by what he had uncovered, made his dangerous decision. They were past his hiding point, picking up speed.

"Callate somebody's all-fired smart," he told the sorrel. "We're on some kinda trail, mebbe the right one."

He stuck on the hundred who evidently were hunting for him, through hours of darkness. As grayness paled the eastern sky, he watched them from a high point as they made a hidden camp in the bush. They had swung southeast, away from the Belfort road.

FROM Hatfield's aerie, Square A range was visible for miles, good grazing land interspersed by cactus flats and dense sections of chaparral. A big vaquero detached himself from the main bunch and galloped back toward the hacienda. He was Manuel, the Mexican who had pointed out the Ranger to Mireles.

"Reportin'," decided Hatfield. "Shore looks like they're on the warpath as promised. And yet how'd that

Slim Shad was looking into the muzzle of the Ranger's Colt (Chap. IX)

murderer the Square A turned over to the Law be ridin' with Ambert's men?" Perhaps as spies—he would stick with the gang.

He kept watching Manuel, to the west observed smoke that came from the cookfires of the Square A. The gray-green eyes, with the penetration of an eagle's vision, slitted as a horseman, far toward the hacienda, spurred out to intercept the courier. Manuel veered his mustang and they spoke together.

He could see Manuel's arms moving as he talked to the man who had met him.

"That's John Ambert," muttered Hatfield, scratching his black head as he sought to unknot the strange puzzle.

He waited, napping through the warm day hours. Goldy, quiet at command, stood guard; at any approach the trained sorrel would nudge him awake even if the man's keen senses did not first bring him alert.

Toward sundown the hidden vaqueros, after their scouts had made sure the way was clear, took the saddle and swung southeast.

It was around 9 p.m. when they struck a town. It was a smaller place than Belfort. The yellow glow of the settlement, standing on a dam which formed a lake in the river, illumined the sky. "Rio Springs," Hatfield muttered. He knew the place, as he knew the mighty southwest; it was in Brewster County, adjoining Terrell. Part of the Square A was in Brewster which touched the Rio Grande, across which lay Old Mexico. Along the corridor the Square A could reach Mexico on its own land.

The riders ahead, an ominous gang of death-dealing raiders, skirted the north edge of the lake and paused outside the light circle. The village was totally unaware of the lurking marauders.

"Hafta get this straight," Hatfield thought, and, with the vaqueros, he checked his guns.

The small chief of vaqueros he glimpsed against the glow of the town, as the hombre turned to give his men commands. They split into two bunches, one heading for the east flank, the other cutting in on the west side of the plaza. Most of them were masked.

Trailing, Hatfield watched. He pushed closer in. From the east side of Main he saw a red flare. A store burst into flames, tinder-dry wood catching; black smoke billowed up on the fanning breeze. "Oil," growled the Lone Wolf, and touched the golden sorrel with a spur point.

THE west gang of vaqueros interposed between the town and him, but now they were moving in, and Goldy spurted forward, the Ranger guiding him up an alley parallel to the main thoroughfare. Looking up between two buildings, he saw a burning torch held by a Mex whose dark face gleamed in the red glow; another had a can from which he splashed kerosene on the side of a saloon.

The Ranger whirled in on them. A gun blared and a vaquero went down, a Ranger bullet piercing his throat. His mate, with a cry of alarm, dropped the can and scurried off; Hatfield spurred on him, reached for him. The hombre threw up his six-gun to fire pointblank. Goldy gave a great leap, teeth bared in a snarl, forehoofs striking the man's chest. The gun exploded in the air and there was a sound like a splitting eggshell as a lightning hoof cracked the fellow's skull.

Pandemonium broke in Rio Springs. The two gangs of riders, whooping in frenzy, on Square A horses and in dark sombreros and sashes affected by Ambert henchmen, whirled to attack. Bullets hailed into windows, through doors; citizens on the walks ducked for cover, taken unawares.

"Revenge," shrieked the vaqueros. "Revenge for the Square A!"

Gunfighters came rushing from saloons and houses, a rapid defense setting up. Determined to strike back at the raiders, they started firing after the Mexes, who, shrieking Spanish imprecations, whirled on south.

Hatfield whipped back down tincan alley, southward; he broke out around the end of the last house just as the

van of the madly riding horsemen came abreast. In the lead was that small devil he had his eye on . . .

Goldy came to a sliding halt, hoofs digging into dirt. The Ranger fired, aim exact, and the Square A mustang on which the tiny vaquero stuck lost its stride, legs doubling under as he crashed dead in the way. The little vaquero rolled head over heels, brought up, lay there stunned. The momentum of their charge took the others far past him, but four pulled up and started back to pick up their leader, who sprawled as he had fallen after the Lone Wolf's expert shot.

Hatfield's two Colts snarled at them, lead whistling. They shot back but one took crippling bullets and was almost knocked from his seat. Infuriated townsmen were jumping on any horse that was handy, to rush after them. The rescuers deserted their chief and galloped after their mates.

The Ranger spurred the sorrel over, leaped down. Citizens seeing him mistook him for a vaquero in the shadows, and, whooping it up, shot his way. But he seized the small hombre, lifted him like a sack of feathers, slung him across the horn and hit leather. Goldy turned and galloped back into the darkness as the raging Texans approached; slugs followed, but zigzagging, Hatfield put walls between himself and the Rio Springs contingent. The speedy sorrel splashed across the ford below the dam and gained on the pursuers in the night.

CHAPTER VII

Outlaw Empire

SHAKING off the men of Rio Spring by clever dodging and backtracking, Jim Hatfield found a protected gully where he could dismount. The prisoner was still limp.

"I hope yuh ain't daid, hombre!" the Lone Wolf muttered.

He laid the man on his back on the ground and, as he was unbuckling his captive's gunbelt to draw his fangs, the small fellow muttered "Quit ticklin'."

One side of his face was bruised and clotted with blood and dirt, where he had slid along the road; blood flowed from his gashed temple. But, save for shock and unimportant wounds, he was unhurt. A drink of water brought him out of his coma, and he opened his bloodshot eyes.

"Hey, señor—who are you?" he demanded in Spanish, as he shook himself to life.

Hatfield didn't answer for a moment. He pulled up some dried bushes close by, struck a match, started a small blaze. By its unsteady light he squatted by the prisoner who, after a searching hand told him his gun had been confiscated, lay as though frozen stiff.

"Howdy, Cactus," said the Ranger pleasantly. "Thought it might be you. Had to make shore."

Cactus Charlie's eyes rolled. He gulped, then growled lamely, in broken English, "What you mean, beeg señor?"

Hatfield shrugged; he reached out, yanked off the black mustache. Cactus Charlie gave a yip as the glue tore his tender flesh. Peaked hat off, berry juice partially rubbed from his skin, his identity was plain.

"What yuh mean to do?" snarled Cactus, as he realized further attempts at concealing himself were useless. "Yuh're wanted for the murder of Sheriff Barr, feller, and I advise yuh to lemme go. Fact, I'll 'low yuh to escape, if yuh'll gimme back my gun."

Hatfield, eyes veiled, pondered his course. "Well, now, Charlie, mebbe I ain't so anxious to turn yuh in. If there's enough in it for me I might be persuaded."

A crafty gleam which the tiny devil sought to hide came into the foxy eyes.

"Callate I'll hafta throw a lot more skeer into him," thought the Ranger. Cactus Charlie was a criminal type, not easily broken; evidently he was thoroughly warned against the big man. Hatfield's acts at the Belfort jail, at the meeting that dark night when the Chief was giving Cactus or-

ders, and at the Square A, would condemn him in the virulent Charlie's eyes.

"Ride along with me," offered Cactus, feigning acquiescence. He tried to stifle his eagerness. "I'll see what I can do for yuh."

Sadly, the Ranger shook his head. "'T won't do, Cactus. I'm afeared yuh'll never come to trust me. And, to tell the truth, I don't trust you."

Cactus swore hotly; then he shrugged. "What yuh mean to do?" he again demanded, truculently.

"I reckon," Hatfield said quietly, "I'll turn yuh over to the Law in Belfort tomorrer mornin'."

Cactus snickered. "That suits me."

The Ranger tied his prisoner and threw him across Goldy, and rode north.

IT was late when Hatfield came in sight of the Chaparral Metropolis, but the town hummed with activity. Leaving Cactus Charlie well-pinioned and gagged, tied to a tree in the bush outside, Hatfield approached the big plaza, where hundreds of infuriated citizens were holding an indignation meeting.

In the air hung wood-smoke, and embers from a large building which had housed a store still glowed. It had burned to the ground and the houses at either side had been scorched, only saved by prompt action of the town's volunteer firemen.

Another gang of vaqueros had hit Belfort while Cactus Charlie's band attacked Rio Springs.

Leaving his sorrel, the tall Ranger slouched on the outskirts of the infuriated gathering, staying half-hidden behind the bole of a live oak. Torches lit the farm wagon which was being used as a platform by speakers.

On the wagon stood the giant Piggy Vorberg, chief of Belfort vigilantes. Vorberg's voice, while harsh, and he used localisms as a sop to the people, was that of an educated man. Evidently he had been trained as a lawyer and Hatfield listened while Piggy roared for the blood of the Square A, fanning the ire of the gathering.

"Fellow citizens," bawled Piggy, "the time has come for a showdown. There ain't room for the Square A wolves and decent folk to live in this state. You've heard Ambert is furious because those four prisoners escaped. He sent his vaqueros to take it out on us and he's importin' hundreds of savage gunmen from below the Rio, killers and raiders. A bunch just hit Rio Springs and tonight they set fire here to Mayor Ben Goodel's store, winged three innocent bystanders." Vorberg turned toward a man. "Here's Mayor Goodel, he wants to say a word."

A tall Texan rose, a man of middle age with a shock of iron-gray hair, and a strong face, a worthy citizen, and a leader. His wide countenance was beet-red as he raised a clenched fist the size of a squash.

"Damn the Square A, gents. I was allus a friend of the Amberts till tonight. Now I'm agin 'em. All of us 're upset and so are other towns; yuh know I have stores in half a dozen places and what with the roads bein' unsafe on account of them vaqueros holdin' up and attackin' decent folks, business is sufferin'. I'm for fightin', and fightin' hard, to end it."

Vorberg started the applause, and a howl rose. The people of Belfort and vicinity were uniting against the Square A.

Again Piggy took the stand. "Boys," he cried, "election's near. The Square A means to scare us from votin' against their candidates. How easy do you scare?"

"None!" "Can't skeer us!" "Damn Mexes, anyway!"

Vorberg struck his open palm with a huge fist. "Here's what I'm tellin' you. Belfort ain't the only settlement those vaquero devils have hit. Come election day the Square A 'll send gunmen to our polls to control the vote for sheriff and for other officials.

"There's one way to stop this war, which 'll go on forever otherwise, ruin our country. We must break the Square A wide open or we'll never be safe. Here's how to do it: there's good water on that range, the Terrell River and big lakes and springs. Belfort and other towns can use it. We have a right to it, called the right of eminent

domain. The Square A can be condemned for reservoir purposes. Savvy?"

SILENCE fell on the crowd. Surprised citizens pondered this startling announcement. "Kin it be done, Vorberg?" Goodel inquired at last. "Why, I thought them Spanish land grants was legal in Texas."

"Don't let that worry you," Piggy assured him. "They've got a lawyer over there from east who thinks he's pretty smart but he can't get around this. The county could put such a big tax on that ranch they'd have to quit, or we can take the whole spread for public uses. I've looked into it carefully and I tell you we can wipe the Square A off the map, put the Amberts out of business. With three county governments votin' against 'em, they'll fold up."

The Ranger pricked up his ears. What Vorberg said was true, and shrewd. The inflamed citizens might vote to seize the Square A empire.

Vorberg drove home his points:

"We can pass a ruling no Mexes can vote, boys. That'll prevent the Square A from polling their riders. We'll have the polls in town, and we got the men to protect 'em, come what may, no matter how many fake riders the Square A tries to ring in." With a melodramatic gesture he flung his arms high. "As for me, I'm with you to the finish. I swear that on my sacred word of honor, gentlemen."

"Hurrah for Piggy," bawled Slim Shad—the bony deputy stood close to the wagon.

A roar went up. The meeting ended, and men headed for saloons or home, excitedly discussing Vorberg's plan.

Hatfield avoided bunches of rapidly dispersing citizens. "That there Piggy's a right fiery orator," he mused. "Hafta keep an eye peeled on him, shore enough!"

Alert, suspicion ripening to certainty as to Vorberg's motives, aware that behind the leaders he had picked out such as Piggy, Slim and Cactus, was a powerful organization of criminals, he watched the giant, accompanied by the unbelievably thin Shad, as the two mounted their horses and cut across the corner of the plaza to the north of town.

He knew Slim Shad was crooked and was deeply intrigued by Vorberg's clever scheme. "Rich pickin's," he decided, "for whoever parcels out that range!"

A quick whistle brought Goldy up. He avoided contact with the people who were busy with their talk over the Square A and Vorberg's plan, and circled around to the other side, just in time to see Piggy and Slim cut between two lighted homes.

At the spot where the pair had disappeared, he cautiously dismounted to reconnoitre. The side way between the homes was dimly lit by rays from nearby windows; it led to a back alley along which stood barns and stables serving the places on Main.

"Stay here and keep shet," he whispered to Goldy, a touch on the animal's soft nose warning enough.

It was imperative he quickly ascertain as many of Vorberg's connections as he could; election day was close and the powerful band he sought to ferret out of the black crime world had a long start on him, had consolidated before his arrival.

He found a narrow walk several buildings down, passed through to the alley. Flitting from shadow to shadow, the Ranger noiselessly approached. Outside the black bulk of a large square barn he saw in the dimness the two horses Slim and Piggy had been riding; and he saw the service door in front was half open. There was no light in the front of the barn. Straining his ears, he heard a murmur of voices and a gruff one said,

"How'd it go, Piggy?"

"Great," answered Vorberg. "I flatter myself I put it over. Don't you think so, Slim?"

"Shore! They're eatin' outa his hand, chief."

"Shut that door," the heavy voice growled.

THE portal closed, Hatfield could no longer hear what was said, there was only a tantalizing murmur coming to him.

"Hafta get in there," he muttered, and cut through to the rear of the barn. Here he was in the stable yard, fields backing against the structures, fields fenced as corrals.

Right under a small window, he heard thudding sounds inside, horses in stalls. Cautiously peeking in, he glimpsed up front the ruby-red glow of a cigar as whoever smoked it inhaled deeply.

If he climbed in with a mustang, it might alarm the animal and create such a disturbance he would be exposed. The Ranger looked up; above was the open door of a mow, through which hay was pitched for storage in the great barn.

He found a loose fence rail, placed it against the side of the barn. By stepping on this he could get a foot on top of the window frame, thence seize the second floor and draw himself quietly up into the mow.

He lay on his belly, listening, the fragrant scent of stored hay in his widened nostrils. Dimly he heard Slim Shad speaking.

"What the hell's that?" "Just a horse moving," was the heavy answer.

He froze, waited till he caught again the murmur of talk. Eyes somewhat oriented to the dark, he crept foot by foot between the stacks of hay. The odor of perfumed tobacco struck his keen senses—he was close to a trapdoor, he could make out the black square and lay flat, eyes just over its level.

He could hear clearly the trio speaking below. The heavy, harsh voice growled, "We've got to make a whirlwind finish. Election's next Tuesday. We'll have to take care of that little squirt of a judge. Be at the Fort tomorrow night around eleven. That's orders."

"We'll be there," promised Vorberg. "Why, there's a million in this one deal alone! We can go on and work it through the whole state and it's legal, no one can touch us. We'll be emperors, control the whole shebang. Why didn't I ever think of it?"

"Don't forget," said Shad, "I'm to be cut in as a commissioner, as well as sheriff."

"You'll get yours and so will everybody else," promised the boss. "Yes, Piggy, you're right. Once we consolidate these three counties, control the Square A, we can sweep right on. A few raids, a few citizens killed, and holdups, and people get frightened and follow us."

Trouble, trouble for Texas, was promised, the Ranger realized. He must smash these devils before they gathered too much momentum!

The thud of fast hoofs approaching caused the Ranger to look around. He saw the open mow door, with a pattern of brilliant stars in a clear sky.

"That'll be the boys from Rio Springs!" Vorberg announced.

The talk ceased. A horseman pulled up in the yard, Hatfield heard him yank open a lower door, the crunch of boots below.

"Hey, Piggy!" called the newcomer, excitedly.

"Hy, Tim, what's wrong? Where's Cactus Charlie?"

"Listen, we hit Rio Springs as ordered and done some of the work but got stopped. Couple of men kilt."

"Was Cactus one of 'em?"

"We dunno. Somehow he was grabbed, picked up; the boys thought a citizen arrested him as they was shot at when they tried to pick him up. We turned after shakin' 'em off, and I sent spies back to the town but they didn't have Cactus in Rio Springs or know anything 'bout him. That's why we're so late."

VORBERG cursed a blue streak. "That little desert rat's been more nuisance than he's worth. He's always bein' captured. First he let the Square A take him, and Shad's game was most spoiled when he had to free Charlie and his pals."

"Yeah, and he says if we don't take keer of him, he'll squeal," snarled Slim Shad.

"He was only talkin'," replied Piggy, "for he knows if he squeals to the Law he'll be hung for the murders he's done. There's too much on him and he needs us more than we do him."

A big gang of riders pounded up to the corral yard. "Here come the boys,"

said Tim. "I'm hittin' the hay, I'm plumb wore out."

The ladder right under Hatfield began to squeak, as Tim climbed up, literally to hit the hay. The Ranger edged back behind a stack, for right beneath that open mow door a hundred gunmen were dismounting, turning their ponies into the pasture. Saddles were slapping on fences, a buzz of low talk rose.

Tim's face, dark-stained with berry juice, gleamed in the faint light as he climbed into the hay and settled himself to sleep. The sounds he made as he snuggled down in the dry grass were within a few feet of the hidden Ranger, who had discovered one of Vorberg's depots for the gunmen he was using to terrify the countryside.

"Callate if anybuddy's importin' killers," thought the Ranger, "it's this bunch."

More and more men came inside, swarming up the ladder, lying down to sleep in the hay. Hatfield could no longer stay where he was; men were swinging toward him as he straightened up and quietly walked toward the back opening.

"Hey, that you, Piggy?" called one, seeing the big figure slouched against the sky.

"What?" (That was Vorberg, and he was coming up the ladder.) "Look here, boys, I've got to locate Cactus Charlie before—"

"Say, I thought that was you right over there!"

"What d' you mean—" Vorberg snapped. Then he saw the Ranger and yelled, "Who's that? Answer or I'll fire."

Below, laggards still were unsaddling, and yet the loft was full of enemies. Hatfield threw himself flat on the splintery boards as Vorberg, with a startled oath, opened fire. The blazing six-gun blinded the gunmen for an instant, the slug whistling over the Ranger and singing into the open air.

Hatfield's Colts spat, as he rolled toward the mow door. A man screeched and Piggy Vorberg bellowed like a stuck pig.

The Ranger gave shrill blasts, whistling above the staccato gunfire; the fury of those pistols, ripping into the astounded gunmen collected at the other end of the loft, ruined their aim. The few with guns ready ducked for cover. Vorberg, behind a thick beam supporting the roof, began to shoot at him. Hatfield cut big chunks off Piggy's beam, the splinters blinding the giant, shaking his hand.

"Get him! he's a spy!" shrieked Vorberg.

THERE were eighty men up there, all quick with guns; the Ranger knew he couldn't waste an instant. Without delay he rolled on, right out of the door, big body sprawling in the air like a tiger's.

A thick hail of leaden death ripped the edges of the floor above him. Half a dozen men were still in the yard, and one stood directly underneath the mow, looking up in suprrise. The Ranger landed on him, his fall broken.

The stunned hombre under him made no attempt to hold him; the others yelled in alarm as the big fellow shot at them to scatter them, and, coming up on his knees, scrambled for the corner. Fighting for wind, Hatfield whipped shots at the face of the loft, where gunmen bunched to finish him; then he was around, with a brief interval when they could not see him.

A golden shape flashed into sight, guided by his master's whistling; Goldy was up, and the Ranger hit the saddle in a single bound. The gelding started for the alley, away from the barn, and Hatfield's slugs kept them back from the corner.

A side door burst open and bullets whirled close; he pumped slugs at the black figures, heard their yelps; then he had turned, the pandemonium of hell left behind.

Scratched, bleeding from a half a dozen flesh wounds, the mighty Ranger's face was grim as Fate; the light in the eyes as dark as an Arctic sea. But the swift lope of the sorrel rapidly took him out of danger.

Hatfield had looked around for Jerry Farmon in the crowd which had been listening to Piggy Vorberg's in-

flammatory speech. The waddy should have hit town before this.

"Callate he's off asleep somewheres," he muttered, wiping blood off his cheek where a bullet had grazed. "And a little of that won't hurt me none, if I take Cactus Charlie to court in the mornin'. And I reckon I'll be at the Fort tomorrow night!"

The tall officer, playing what cards he had been able to draw in the vast death shuffle, meant to lay his aces right down in face of his fiercest enemies.

CHAPTER VIII

At the Square A

JERRY FARMON started to full consciousness, stared about. His hand fumbled for his gun, for the last thing he vaguely recalled, as in a nightmare, was that he had been seized by rough hands.

But his belt had been taken and with it the Colt. He lay on a soft bed, and, as his vision cleared, he saw the moonlit rectangle of a window to his left. To the right was an open door and lamplight came down a hall from the distance.

People talking near his room had disturbed him. His head ached but it was bandaged and so was his shoulder wound, and though he felt pretty weak, he was okay.

"Louise," a petulant voice said, "I've bin tryin' to get yuh alone all evenin'! But yuh don't seem to want to talk. You're avoidin' me!"

Louise Ambert laughed. "I wouldn't say that, George. I've been busy. Fernando and his men wanted to tie up that poor wounded fellow, and Uncle John agreed. I had to see he was taken care of, and bandage his wounds.'

This did not assuage Pennock's feeling; in fact, it made him angrier. "Yeah, yuh've spent all evenin' watchin' over that wuthless cowpoke! Yuh act as though yuh're stuck on him."

"Be careful what you say," Louise said sharply, "You've no right to speak so to me."

George began to plead. "I didn't mean to rile yuh, dear. Yuh know I love yuh. Marry me, Louise. My dad's well-off and we were made for each other."

Jerry Farmon felt ashamed; also he felt a deep fear. But that fear was quickly dispelled as Louise laughed, in reply to George's rough proposal.

"I can't marry you, George, I've told you that. I like you, but I could never love you."

"I knew it. Yuh sweet on that waddy," flared Pennock. His disappointment was keen and he showed it as a child might.

Farmon was very embarrassed. He coughed loudly, and at once the two stopped talking.

Louise hurried to his door. Her face was anxious as she struck a match, touched it to a blackened wick of the candle on a table.

"How are you?" she asked kindly.

"Fine, ma'am."

The tenderness in her eyes sent a thrill through Farmon. "You—yuh sorta saved me," he went on. I'm mighty grateful."

"Would you like something to eat?" she asked quickly.

He nodded. Past her, he saw Pennock's pouting face, scowling in at him. "If yuh got a minute to say good-bye," George said sarcastically, "I'll be ridin'."

"Good-bye," she replied coldly.

LOUISE AMBERT went out with Pennock but shortly afterwards returned, carrying a tray filled with food and a pitcher of milk. She sat by Jerry while he consumed the meal.

Tacitly neither mentioned the gulf which separated them. To Farmon, everything seemed inconsequential save the presence of the young woman.

"Louise!" The man's voice came from the front salon.

"That's Uncle John," she said, rising quickly, and going out, with her light, swift tread.

A few moments later, Farmon heard Ambert say angrily, "If he's well, then

get him out of here. I won't harbor a spy and killer in my home."

"He's not a killer and not a spy," Louise replied as spunkily. "It was that big man who shot Mireles."

Jerry rose, he felt weak in the knees. His boots stood by a chair, his Stetson hung by its strap from the back. He pulled on his boots, took his hat, and stepped out into the long corridor. He strode toward the big room where Louise faced the angry John Ambert, her head high, eyes flashing.

"Get him out of here before I kill him!" shouted Ambert furiously.

"The house is half mine," declared Louise.

"Not till you're twenty-one, young lady!" cried her uncle. "I'm your guardian and trustee. Your father was my brother and I mean to—"

Martin Bond stepped to the angry man's side, took his arm. "Calm down, John. That won't do any good. I'm sure Miss Louise knows what she's doing."

The overwrought man muttered angrily for a moment; then he shrugged, a smile broke the grim line of his lips. "I'm sorry, dear." He patted the girl's soft arm. "I'm badly upset. I hope you'll forgive me."

She kissed him. Farmon, in the door, said, "I'll go if yuh wish me to, Mr. Ambert, but I'm no spy. And I think Jim had a good reason for pluggin' that rurale."

But Ambert, if he forgave his niece, had no use for Jerry. "Any man, "he said coldly, "who kills a police officer, needs a better reason for it than any I can imagine. As for staying here I suppose you heard what was said, and I repeat it to your face: I don't trust you, but my niece, as she avers, has a claim to half the house."

The sardonic eyes glowed. "She may keep you or anyone else she desires in her half. Come along, Bond. We'll have to start at once if we hope to make Belfort by morning."

"It's the best move," said Bond. "Something drastic must be done by Tuesday or we lose. It's too late now to reach Austin and your wires to the Governor have brought us nothing."

"You're right."

The two went outside. Sounds of preparations, saddling of horses, burnishing of guns, sounded from the corrals, where bonfires blazed red in the night.

Farmon turned to Louise. "Yore uncle's goin' to Belfort?"

"Yes. They've decided it's the last chance. He's afraid of what may happen at the election Tuesday. He feels he must make his position clear, and he wants to speak with the new judge. The Square A has been accused of

[*Turn page*]

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many crimes and he means to deny them."

THE pretty girl sat down on a divan. Jerry, struck by her loveliness, followed, and she smiled up into his eyes. He was rattled as he sat beside her, his heart pounded.

"I wish I could help yuh," he blurted. "I was foolish thinkin' yuh'd have anything to do with Cole's death. If yore vaqueros done it, yuh shore didn't know of it."

"I'm glad you feel that way," she told him earnestly. "I assure you, the Square A is square, Jerry. We've never done any wrong, we've just protected ourselves. As for raiding towns, that's absurd. Why it's been done and laid on us, we can't imagine; we have thousands of horses running our range, and they could be roped and used. But—why?" She was deeply troubled.

"If there's anything I kin do—"

"Well, we need all the friends we can find."

Their eyes locked, with the clear gaze of youth. All suspicion and distrust had melted between them. He could not resist his emotion, and before he knew it he had seized her and was kissing her full lips.

"I—I love yuh," he murmured.

He was astounded at his own temerity, he was fearful she would be offended, send him away; but to his overpowering joy, she put her arms around him.

"Yuh—really care for me?" he gasped. "It's hard to believe, a girl like you—I—"

"I love you, Jerry."

Quickly they separated, looking guilty, as steps sounded on the porch. John Ambert came in. "We're going now, dear."

She went over to kiss her uncle goodbye; Martin Bond, face grave, stood behind Ambert.

By impulse, Farmon suddenly stepped toward Ambert, hand extended. He wanted to shake hands, tell Ambert he was with the Square A.

A bullet ripped from a side window, and it missed Farmon only because he had so quickly moved from his former position. He felt the whirl of disturbed air as it whizzed behind his head, the thud in the wall, and startling report reverberating through the room.

"Damn yuh!—Leggo of me!" a shrill voice screamed from outside the window, as Farmon swung that way.

Sounds of swift tussle came in. "Señor Ambert!" That was Fernando calling. The foreman and several vaqueros appeared at the end of the long veranda, dragging a captive with them, out into the light.

Ambert and all went out onto the porch, and stared at George Pennock, whom the strong Fernando held in a grip of steel. "He shoot through the window," reported Fernando. "I see heem, señor, and crep' up on heem."

Louise's face turned scarlet with anger. "You—you beast!" she cried, and her hand slapped the sulky face of the fat youth. "You were watching us, and tried to kill Jerry!"

George Pennock recoiled from the blow. "Cut it out," he snarled. "Listen, Ambert, yore precious niece is in love with this waddy spy. I saw her kissin' him."

FARMON'S fist clenched, he bit his lip in anger as he took a step toward Pennock, but John Ambert beat him to it. The Square A boss's bony knuckles caught George in the pouting lips, smashed them against his teeth so blood spurted.

"If she was kissing Farmon," Ambert said thickly, "it's not your part to play the sneak and try to drygulch him. Your father's been a friend of mine but I don't want to see you around here again. Fernando, start him on his way home!"

Evidently Ambert did not trust himself to speak again to Louise. She was shaken and Farmon stood close to her, a hand seeking hers. She clung to it, watching her tall, saturnine uncle mount, with Martin Bond and a dozen vaqueros. A great crowd of Mexicans stood around, among them Fernando gripping George Pennock by the collar. They silently watched, begging with their eyes to be taken along, but Ambert had picked only a few, and

Fernando was left in charge of the main spread.

Ambert and Bond, with their escort, rode off into the velvet darkness. John Ambert, alone, came swinging back for a minute; he called a squat, dark-faced peon to him, a man whose high cheek bones proclaimed him as part Indian.

"I wonder what he's telling Celestino," said Louise.

Ambert was but a moment; then he rode on back to his party.

Louise was crying, softly. "He's been so good to me, always. I hate to disturb him. It's been a terrible fight, Jerry, a hard fight, and I'm afraid we've lost it."

The pride which had stood between them had melted; she was only a woman and Farmon felt her dependence on him. They went inside, sat down. Jerry told her of himself, how he'd been a bronc buster and saved enough to buy a small spread near Lenox.

"My best pal was Bill Cole, we rode together. Then he got a depitty job, and a black-headed killer named Dowd, who was to hang, knocked out his guard on a train and escaped. He shot a cowboy in our county so Cole took his trail and stuck on it; he'd never quit like the others did. I traced him to yore range and Jim Harris found his body. I reckon Cole caught up with Dowd too sudden and was ambushed. I guess Dowd escaped to Mexico."

She shivered. "This Dowd must be awful."

"Yeah, he's tough. He's got black hair, they say, and is purty stocky. But it was Cole I was huntin'."

THEY talked together; hours sped magically. There was a stir outside, and a vaquero appeared, saluted his mistress.

"Senorita Ambert," he said in soft Spanish. "Rurale Captain Gasca to see you."

A slim Mexican with a handsome face entered, sweeping off his sombrero in a gallant bow. "Your oncle, he's gone, señorita?"

"Yes, Captain Gasca." She turned to Jerry. "This is Captain Juan Gasca of the Coahuila state police, an old friend. Is there anything I can do for you, Captain?"

Gasca hesitated. He sat down at her invitation and a peon brought food, drink.

"I tell you why I am here. Criminals by the hundred have cross' the Rio onto your range. Zey say zere's good pay here—I come to warn your oncle."

Jerry watched the play of the agile features. He drawled, "Say, have yuh got a cap'n down thatway called Mireles?"

Gasca shook his head. "No—you see, señor, we have not right to cross the bordaire wizout pairmission. I come as personal frien'."

"But don't yuh know this Captain Mireles," insisted Farmon. "A giant of an hombre, with a big black mustache, who moves like a panther; very keen and handsome—"

Gasca's eyes flashed. "You, you talk of the giant Coahuila bandit, Porquila. You see heem? I shoot heem daid, even in Texas! He keeled three of my best men las' month!"

"Jerry then your friend Jim was right!" Louise cried. "Why, how foolish we were; we took that outlaw's word for it he was a rurale, as we'd sent for them."

Quickly they told Gasca of the shooting of the great bandit Porquila. "I would like," remarked Gasca, "to shake the han' of the man who keel him."

"Your friend will be glad to find this out," said Louise, "that it wasn't a rurale he shot, but a criminal."

Farmon slapped his thigh, laughed. "Figger," he cried, "that Jim already knowed it. That's why he shot him, and why he started to take the body to Mexico. Guess he wanted to contact yuh, Captain."

Gasca's face was a study. "He was clevaire to peek zis Porquila as a faker."

"We thought he was a new officer in the district," Louise said.

"Eet would take expert to say so quickly. Porquila has pose' as a rurale before. I would like to meet the Jeem of yours, señor."

"It's a good idee. He headed for Belfort and I'm s'posed to meet him there. I'll hafta ride there."

"I go along zen. For zere ees deep trouble along the Bordaire and we mus' work eet out."

Jerry Farmon was unaware that he was playing with death. If Captain Gasca knew it, he said nothing about it. He took leave of Louise, promising to return as soon as he could; he was sure she would be safe under the careful eyes of Fernando and his men.

Gasca and Farmon rode east together, the hoofs of their horses clopping on the trail as they climbed up and down the ridges. They rode till dawn paled the sky ahead, and as they came up onto another rise, they saw a party of tough looking riders who swung toward them from the south, and trotted in their direction.

"I don't like the way they're comin'," Jerry remarked, feeling for his gun.

"Nor I," agreed Gasca. "We outride zem."

As their fast horses picked up speed, so did the gang. Bullets whirled after them, zipping overhead, striking puffs of dust up at the sides.

CHAPTER IX

The Fight at the Court

IT was nine next morning when Jim Hatfield rode Goldy up to Belfort Town Hall. The sky was leaden, dark with scurrying wind clouds, and dust whipped up in blinding whorls as the tall, imperturbable officer stopped outside the square building on the edge of the plaza.

Cactus Charlie, one end of a rawhide thong tied to cuffed wrists, the other to Goldy's saddle horn, trotted beside his captor, cursing him between gasps for wind.

"Yuh'll die fer this," raved Cactus.

Paying no attention to the threats of the bedraggled little devil, the Ranger dismounted, sent Goldy off with a gentle slap. It was time, he thought, that he made a public demonstration that would impress not only his enemies, but the decent folk of the district as well.

"Get along inside, Cactus," he ordered, shoving the tiny hombre through the main door.

Inside the dim hallway he paused to sniff—the odor of perfumed tobacco. It drifted slowly from an open portal to his right, marked "County Commissioner."

He glanced in. At a desk he saw a very short, fat gentleman with a bald head and chins sagging to his collarbone. The blue smoke from the cigar drifted to his narrowed eyes, squeezed by fat bunches. By the open window, sullen lips pouting and a purple circle under his eye where a fist had connected, sat a young fellow; he, too, was smoking a cigar.

On the other side of the hall was the sheriff's office, and Slim Shad sat there, long legs up, leaning way back in his chair. His Stetson was down over his eyes and he was dozing comfortably, hands clasped across an almost non-existent belly.

"Hey, Shad!" cried Cactus Charlie.

Slim Shad opened his fishy eyes. His sharp chin dropped, and so violent was his reaction he fell over backward. But he was up at once, to his full height, staring at Hatfield.

Hatfield tugged Charlie, who flew through the air after him. Slim Shad flashed to his door, six-gun in a bony paw. "Hey, yuh're wanted fer murder, Harris—"

But he was looking into the black muzzle of the big fellow's Colt. Cactus Charlie, in the direct line of Shad's gun, yelped, "Hold it, don't shoot, yuh'll get me, Slim."

"C'mon, if yuh wish, Slim," said the Ranger coldly. "I'm takin' this escaped pris'ner before the Judge."

Slim Shad hesitated. He felt foolish, with his gun hanging there and him not daring to make a motion. The tight look around the tall jigger's mouth, his remembrance of Hatfield's speed, restrained any impetuous ideas he might have had.

"G'wan, go to hell!" he snarled lamely as fear yellowed his eyes.

"What's the meaning of the gun-

play, sir?" a deep voice demanded. The commissioner had waddled to the door of his office, and behind him his spoiled son scowled at the Ranger.

"Yuh're welcome to come, too," drawled Hatfield.

He had made an inquiry as to ownership of that large barn where he had clashed with the gunmen the previous night. It belonged, it seemed, to the house wherein County Commissioner Pennock resided.

He backed around the turn, dragging the spiteful Charlie with him, and entered a large, rectangular room, set with wooden benches on which sat a few citizens with cases to put before the circuit judge.

JUDGE JEREMIAH WELLES sat on a high stool behind the desk, facing them. He was speaking earnestly with two disputants but, looking down, saw the Ranger and prisoner. For the big fellow's benefit he winked a solemn eye.

"What you-all got theah?" inquired the magistrate, gazing at the raked, blood-scabbed face of Cactus Charlie, which still was blotched with berry stain which had been used to darken it. Plain, too, was the Mexican clothing, the torn red sash and Stetson which had made up the virulent hombre's disguise as a Square A vaquero.

"I think it's a killer, Jedge," the Ranger told Welles gravely. He lifted Cactus by the scuff of the short jacket, held him dangling before the judge's vision. "He done put up a hot resistance though he got most of it by fallin' off a horse."

The peppery jurist's seamed eyes gleamed. "I reckon he gave you quite a battle, suh. But what's the charge exactly and where're your witnesses?"

"This man's one of four caught on Square A range, havin' kilt two Mexicans and fired the chaparral. I guarantee he's one tough killer."

"H'm." Welles swung to the court clerk, who was so astonished at the spectacle of Cactus Charlie and the tall Ranger he had half-swallowed his tobacco cud and seemed in a state of suspended animation. "Call the sheriff, Clerk. Time I met him. Why ain't he been around to report?"

The clerk gulped; he choked, his face purple. Everbody stared. The clerk started out, looking back over his shoulder.

Slim Shad entered so quickly it was plain he had been outside in the hall, listening. Welles pointed at Cactus.

"Is this man your prisoner, Sheriff?" he asked loftily.

Slim Shad glowered, ran his ugly eyes up and down Cactus. He shook his head.

"Dunno him," he snapped.

Judge Welles glanced at the Ranger; he asked smoothly, "What's your wish, suh?"

"Why, shore," a citizen exclaimed, "that's Cactus Charlie, who escaped from the jug."

Shad frowned, shrugged.

"The jail bein' so easy to walk out of, Judge," drawled Hatfield, "I'd better hold onto this pris'ner myself."

Cactus Charlie cast a fearful look at the tall jigger.

"Prisoner remanded in your custody." Welles said quickly.

"Yuh can't do it," yelled Cactus. "It ain't legal! This big devil 'll kill me, Jedge."

Running steps sounded in the hall. Hatfield was watching the entry as Piggy Vorberg, trailed by several armed vigilantes, burst into the courtroom.

"There he is, Piggy," croaked Shad, pointing in high excitement at the Ranger. "That's the sidewinder stabbed Tom Barr!' '

THE grating twang of the deputy's voice struck Judge Welles like a slap in the face. He rose up on the rungs of his stool, face flushing pink and pointed an accusing finger at Slim Shad.

"You, Deputy," he cried, "you held me up on my way to Belfort and tried to intimidate me. I'd know that nasty voice in a million. Harris, put that man under arrest."

The mad instants that ensued were too fast to follow with the eye. Slim Shad, primeval fear burning his strange face, entirely lost his aplomb. A bony paw flew to the six-shooter in

its open holster, the nickel-trimmed weapon cleared leather, long thumb cocking as it rose to fire at the little magistrate. Slim knew he was guilty, he was shaken; his reaction was to fight, escape.

The Ranger's blue-steel Colt blared a hurry call, fired from the hip, with the unerring aim of a natural and trained gunfighter. Forced to save Welles, Hatfield could not wait even the flicker of an eyelid. Shad's slug tore a jagged hole in the high bar of justice, ripped the judge's black coat tail. But, even as it rose to finish Welles, Slim Shad's hand had checked, checked as his life impulses ceased, brought to a halt by the Ranger lead that hit under his heart and shocked his vitals.

The thin frame snapped double, like a quickly folded jack-knife. His head thudded the floor at Piggy Vorberg's spread feet.

A curl of smoke whisped from the black muzzle of the Colt; it still pointed at the spot in the air where Slim Shad had been standing. A shift of an inch would pin Vorberg.

A taught silence fell, no man dared to move a muscle for instants.

Piggy Vorberg, chief of vigilantes who took the Law into their own reckless hands, had brought his porcine bulk to such a sudden stop that he nearly fell over on his pudgy face. He wore his sand-colored hat, emblem of the townsmen. The small brown eyes, surrounded by fleshy rolls, were wide; the squashed nose twitched. He had on brown pants that hung over his black boots, an open vest exposing a barrel chest and wide belt supporting two silver-plated guns.

His thick lips parted as he saw the tall Ranger coldly regarding him. Those gray-green eyes, piercing like icicles, the intent look of the tall hombre, had brought the furious attorney to that sudden halt. He did not like the speed and efficiency of the slim hands.

Judge Welles was first of the spectators who saw the swift duel to come to himself. "Many thanks, suh," he said graciously to Hatfield. "You saved my life."

He swung on Vorberg, a note of irritation in his voice: "What's the meanin' of this intrusion, suh? How dare you burst so into my court? Take off those guns, every one of you, and remove your hats."

The order took Vorberg by surprise. Fury burned the small eyes, blood flushing hot under his pinkish skin. The lawyer removed his fascinated gaze from Hatfield to scowl at Welles.

"Take off those guns, I said!" snapped the judge.

"What about him, Your Honor," sneered Piggy, the title like a slap in the face with sarcastic intonation, as he indicated the Ranger. "He just used his gun to murder our sheriff."

"Mr. Harris is my personal officer, suh. He has my permission to wear his guns to maintain order in this court—and in just one minute I'll order him to go ahead and maintain. Lucky he had them on or you'd have a magistrate to bury instead of a conniving, murderous deputy."

VORBERG hesitated, eyes traveling the circle of his men; not one seemed ready to buck the tall jigger. And the lawyer was up front, sensed that if gunplay opened again he would be first to take lead.

Giving his followers the cue, he slowly and carefully unbuckled his gunbelt and hung it on a chair back. "I want a word with you, Judge," he growled. "You're badly mistaken about some things around here. Maybe I can make them clear."

Welles nodded. "Harris, take the door," he ordered as Piggy's men discarded their belts, "and don't let any man in 'less he shucks his guns."

Hatfield shoved Cactus Charlie into a seat. "Keep quiet," he murmured.

More and more people, hearing of the excitement, were hustling to the court. They were met, as they entered, by the Ranger, and a large collection of guns soon hung on the chairs.

Hatfield did not minimize the importance of the proceedings. With his clever sense of values he knew that whichever faction won in Belfort court must have a powerful effect in

the community. It was Law against lawlessness.

The big chamber filled with spectators, others crowded the hall. Many were decent citizens, followers of Mayor Ben Goodel. But there were hostile undercurrents set up by hard-eyed hombres, henchmen of Vorberg's; yet none dared openly to take the offensive, for the tall man at the door seemed to have his eye on everyone.

Everybody wanted a look at the big jigger; it was said he had not only shot down Slim Shad but had also stabbed Sheriff Barr. Yet when they saw him as the judge's officer, honest men began to express doubts.

Vorberg, an arm on the bar top, was hotly arguing with Welles. The excited buzz of talk in the room finally was stilled by the banging of the judge's gavel.

"Gentlemen," said Welles testily, "there's an absurd personal charge made against my friend, Jim Harris, by this attorney, Vorberg. It won't hold water at all. Harris rode here as my bodyguard, the night you say he killed Sheriff Barr. What possible motive could he have for such a foul deed? I know he carried no knife, and I am the one who sent him to the sheriff to inform said official of my arrival. I can't listen to such crazy talk as this."

Softly but incisively, so all heard, Hatfield said, "Judge yuh know it was Slim Shad held yuh up on yore way here. It was Shad who kilt Barr. He done it because Barr caught him freein' Cactus Charlie and his pals. Slim run out the back way as I come in, doubled round, and accused me."

Vorberg's fat face was purple. He raised his voice to drown out the Ranger.

"I've got something else to say to you, Judge Welles," he bellowed. "Besides representing Cactus Charlie, I am head of the Belfort vigilantes. I demand you let Charlie go free and any of our other friends who have fought the Square A. Most of us here have done that, and mean to keep on till those murderous devils are wiped off the map of Texas. They've raided and killed too long in our country."

A murmur of approbation ran through the excited throng. "Leave Cactus go," cried a man, feet thudded, and Welles rapped for order in vain.

Hatfield glided to Cactus Charlie. "Stand up," he said. Every eye followed the supple Ranger; they quieted as he faced them, hand raised. Cactus slumped at his side.

"Gents," drawled the officer, "I want yuh to take a good look at this hombre, whom yuh all seem to know. He's posed as fightin' on yore side, but last night I caught him in Rio Spring, leadin' a pack of vaqueros ridin' Square A brand mustangs. They burnt a store in Rio Springs, and shot some citizens.

"See for yoreselves, Charlie's still wearin' vaquero clothes, and the berry juice stain ain't all off his skin. Yuh're makin' a big mistake to blame these raids on the Square A."

Honest men stared at Cactus, and doubt began to assail them. They began whispering among themselves.

Piggy Vorberg leaped into the breach, the fierce struggle for mental supremacy hot between the Ranger and the attorney. "He's a fool," he shouted. "The Square A's beyond the pale. I've recognized plenty of their men myself on these attacks. They're importin' hundreds of gunmen from Mexico. Sure, Cactus was with 'em; he's acting as a spy for us!"

He swung to Welles. "Judge, here and now I demand an injunction to prevent the Square A from voting these Mex gunmen they're hiring, during the coming election."

SEVERAL of Piggy's cronies started a cheer; Hatfield's cool eyes picked them out.

Welles replied coldly, "Suh, I cannot issue an order depriving an American citizen of his franchise. Any non-citizen caught trying to cast a ballot is answerable to the Law—"

Shouts and gunshots outside electrified the tense courtroom.

"The Square A! Here comes the Square A!"

"Grab yours guns, boys, out and at 'em," shrieked Vorberg, jumping to-

ward the pile of belts.

But Hatfield was there, grasped the giant's thick arm, hurled him back. Vorberg brought up hard against the wall.

"Keep yore seats, gents," ordered Hatfield. "If there's any shootin' I'll tend to it."

The infuriated Piggy raved at Hatfield. Judge Welles pounded the bar top till the gavel head flew off. "Vorberg," he cried angrily, "I fine you five hundred dollars for contempt of court."

From where he stood, Hatfield could see out the window to Main Street. John Ambert and Martin Bond, with a dozen vaqueros, walked their horses to the Town Hall. The sun shone on burnished equipment, rifles in boots, six-guns and knives, brass-studded belts, and trimmed sombreros. Dark eyes flicked from side to side.

Bond and Ambert, neither visibly armed, dismounted, leaving their men waiting outside. Jim Hatfield swore under his breath; the appearance, so unexpected, at this time of Ambert was like waving a red rag in front of an angry bull. He was fighting to still the passions of decent townsmen in Belfort, had hoped to sift the wheat from the chaff by his play.

"Trouble comin', shore as hell's hot," he muttered.

"We won't tolerate this, Judge," cried Vorberg, banging a huge fist under the judge's nose. "You'll find you're makin' a big error, siding with these murderous devils. We won't allow it. If you try to convict any of my friends for defending themselves against the Square A, you'll soon be damn sorry."

"Are you threatenin' me, suh?" shrilled Welles, almost beside himself with reciprocal anger. "You're fined five hundred dollars more and barred from practicin' in this heah court. Get out!"

"I'll have you thrown off the Bench," bawled Vorberg.

"Quiet, Vorberg," drawled the Ranger, and that easy voice checked the maddened giant.

COMMISSIONER PENNOCK waddled in; he was closely followed by John Ambert and Martin Bond.

The attorney for the Square A bowed to Judge Welles, standing at his client's side. "Your Honor," began Bond politely, "my name is Martin Bond and I am an accredited member of the State Bar. This gentleman, John Ambert, is my client. We have come to beg justice."

Welles caught the Ranger's look; he nodded. "I shall be glad to hear you, suh."

Ambert, proud as an eagle, began to speak.

"The Square A," he said, "has been accused of many terrible crimes. First, I want to deny them. My men have not stepped off the ranch boundaries and have shot only in self-defense, against raiders. I've brought only a small escort with me, today, as you can see, to prove my good intentions. I've heard an attempt is to be made to keep my workers from voting Tuesday; though most are of Mexican blood, they're American citizens. I've also heard my range is to be confiscated, and this is an appalling injustice; I swear we've done nothing to deserve such a fate."

Honest men such as Ben Goodel, people who were suffering intensely from the bloody strife, heard Ambert.

Mayor Goodel rose and said quietly, "Ambert, yore vaqueros burnt my store, near ruint me. I seen 'em, their get-up, the mustangs they forked. I was a friend of the Square A till then."

Goodel, Hatfield knew, was an influence for decency throughout the territory. Honest men looked to him as a leader, opposing the extreme policies of Piggy Vorberg.

Ambert turned burning eyes on Goodel. "Ben," he said, "our horses run the range in big herds and are easily roped. Peaked sombreros may be bought anywhere. Our enemies have done this."

Goodel stared at Cactus Charlie "That sorta fits with what this big jigger was sayin'—"

"Ambert lies," broke in Vorberg.

"He's trying to scare us out and gain full control of the three counties his ranch touches."

The sardonic owner of the Square A scowled at Piggy, and the balance teetered back and forth.

"Too soon," Hatfield thought. "Ambert's made a wrong play—I got to get him outa here pronto." He realized the awful danger of that instant, the raw passions involved. All that was needed to set off the explosion was a spark—

It came.

CHAPTER X

Massacred

A VOLLEY of gunshots smashed the leaden air outside. A Square A vaquero threw up his arms, crashed dead in the road. Others were wounded, and all who could of the small band swung to face the wanton attackers.

Men in sand-colored Stetsons whirled from behind the west line of houses. Some agent of death had fetched them, from the big barn, Hatfield concluded. And as firing started, men ran out, vigilantes armed with rifles and pistols, concluding the Square A had come to fight.

Bullets rapped the walls of the Town Hall.

Vorberg was first out into the hall; an insane stampede to escape from the courtroom started, men fighting one another, trampling the weaker. Bedlam reigned, as the street fight roared to its inevitable, bloody conclusion.

The handful of vaqueros were outnumbered twenty to one. Their leader, a squat Mex in flaming sash, leaped to a window and shouted in. "Señor Ambert," he called, "this way, pronto."

A blast of bullets caught him in the spine; he flexed back, dropped from sight.

Face paling, Ambert fought to reach the window, to get to his handful of loyal followers who would not desert him, but he was knocked off his feet, behind the bar of justice, by the surge of the excited crowd.

Mayor Ben Goodel, staring at the window where the Square A vaquero had died, roared, "Hey—that's murder! Cut it out, boys, those Mexes ain't shootin'!" But his voice was drowned in the rush.

Hatfield's powerful arms opened a way through the stream of humanity to Welles. Close by the bar crouched Ambert and Martin Bond. Crazed citizens could hear nothing above the din, the magistrate's shrill commands lost in the shuffle. By main force the Ranger reached the trio back of the bar and shoved them into a side eddy.

A small, closed door led to the judge's chambers. Hatfield, aware Vorberg would be back armed and with an army of gunmen, herded the three he sought to protect through the portal, bolted it after them.

"I must get out of here, save my men," gasped Ambert. His face was a ghost's, eyes horror-stricken. A window opened on Tin Can Alley, and there was a second door into the rear corridor.

"You should never 've come here, Ambert," growled the Ranger. "It was a foolish play."

"I know it—now. But I thought—"

Shouts rang outside in the hall. "Get him, get Ambert. He's in back there!"

"The three of yuh climb out that winder, pronto," snapped Hatfield. Both his Colts were out to cover the doors; men were throwing their weight against them, and a panel splintered in the hall portal. Hatfield put a slug through the upper part to scare them.

The small entry into the courtroom burst in, and fierce-eyed hombres in sandy sombreros bunched there, guns rising. The Ranger's slugs drove them back, those in front stepping on the toes of their pushing mates. Citizens mixed with Vorberg gunmen, and the Ranger wished only to save the men he had taken under his wing.

ALREADY the three were climbing through into the side path connecting the street and alley. The hot

fury of Hatfield's guns held back the mob, and in a jiffy he had his charges out. "Where to?" cried Bond.

John Ambert's face was tortured with anguish; only four or five of his vaqueros still stuck to their saddles, refusing to run without him. Hails of lead cut about them.

Crazed by grief, Ambert suddenly broke from the small flock Hatfield sought to save. He ran full speed toward Main Street, shouting, "Hurry, boys! Ride for home!"

"Come back, yuh fool," called the Ranger, aware of the value of seconds.

Ambert didn't stop. Hatfield said, to Welles, "Get to yore hotel quick, Judge." Bond ran with the little jurist behind a shed that hid them from the courthouse.

The gunmen who had been in Tin Can Alley had entered the building, and were starting to shoot from the side window. Hatfield forced them back with his bullets, as he ran after Ambert.

Close to the walk, Ambert paused to yell again to his men. Suddenly he was half spun around in his tracks; his right hand groped at his side, and he crashed in a huddled mass.

Only three vaqueros were left; they had seen their boss, spurred to him. Their horses covered the front of the alley, and no shot could have come past Hatfield; the other wall was blank.

A Mexican leaped down, gathered up Ambert in his arms, flung him across the saddle. The pitiful remnant of the Square A bunch struck west, swept around the flank of the attackers by hard riding. Bursts of gunfire caught them, and another fell.

The man carrying Ambert nearly got clear. He was over between the houses before the bullets hit him. His horse crashed, slinging vaquero and Ambert into the dust; the infuriated mob closed over them.

"Somebody got him from the courthouse winder," muttered the Ranger. He had stopped, before reaching the canopied walk, saw Ambert fall the second time, knew it was hopeless to try to do anything for the Square A boss now.

The window sash was up, and the bullet that had killed Ambert had come from inside the office.

Now a slug ripped from the window, and nicked his ribs, half spun him around, but with gritted teeth his Colt replied like an echo and a sharp yip of pain sounded inside the dark room. A man fell flat on the floor, out of sight; as the Ranger approached the opening, left hand touching the ground to steady him as he crouched, he heard yells in there. Bullets whirled out, thick and fast, for Piggy Vorberg's killers were crowding into the office from which the death bullet had been fired.

"There he is! Get him!" There was a mad rush to the window, to kill Hatfield.

RIGHT under the sill, the Ranger shoved around the corner, in front of the Town Hall. Dead vaqueros lay biting the dirt, and several of their horses, with the trapping of the Square A. A couple of dead gunmen lay close by, and as he passed, Hatfield scooped up a sand-colored Stetson.

Moving rapidly, minding the windows, he glanced inside the courtroom. Cactus Charlie still sat in his chair, as Hatfield had left him. His head was back, limp on one shoulder.

"Callate they wasn't takin' any more chances with him," muttered the Ranger.

They were concentrating on him, now, and men who had climbed from the window whooped as they glimpsed him. He burned the walls and corners with bullets, as he ducked to the north side of the building, whistling for Goldy.

The sorrel galloped up, he swung into the saddle and cut over behind a neighboring house where he had protection from Vorberg's aroused killers.

The battle was done. The bunch which had overwhelmed Ambert was starting back to connect with Piggy Vorberg, who was yelling at the top of his lungs from the main entrance.

Eyes dark with a cold fury, the tall officer spurred the sorrel around to

the back of the Town Hall, and galloped full tilt behind the line of stables and barns.

Dodging in and out, he eluded those who sought him. From the back door of the hotel, Jeremiah Welles hailed him.

"Jim come in heah, and be quick about it, 'fore they kill yuh."

"I'm ridin', Judge. Lie low in yore room, savvy. I'll get in touch with yuh after dark, when this fuss dies down some."

He calculated it best to distract the gunmen, lead them out of town to give Welles and Bond a chance.

Swinging, he cut up to Main, rode openly across the plaza. Vorberg, at the Town Hall, spied him and uttered a bellow. Bullets came after him as he trotted the golden sorrel out of Belfort.

They started after him, shooting and yelling. He let them gain for a time, to egg them on. Once outside, he gradually opened the sorrel up and left them behind the valley slopes.

A mile outside Belfort he saw two men coming at a trot toward him and he stopped, eyes alert; then he shoved on, to meet Jerry Farmon and a slim Mexican who rode with him.

"Jim!" Farmon hailed him eagerly.

The three joined. "Howdy," drawled Hatfield, slinging a long leg around his saddle horn as he rolled a cigarette and looked over the Mexican.

"Jim, meet Cap'n Gasca of the Coahuila police. He says that big sidewinder, Mireles, yuh plugged, was an outlaw. Reckon yuh guessed it all along."

"I did sorta figger he was wrong."

He watched the rurale. Gasca's white teeth gleamed as he held out a hand. "A pleasure, senor," he cried. "I theenk eet an honaire to shak' the han' that keel Mireles."

The three spirted horses were close together, Goldy, Sal and the handsome black mustang of the rurale. Hatfield shook hands with Gasca.

"Jim," began Farmon, "Gasca says that for some time gunmen 've bin comin' outa the bush, headin' this way. Thought yuh oughta know." He went on, quickly described what had occurred at the Square A.

WHEN Farmon had finished, he stared at the grim, set face of the Ranger. "Anything wrong?" he inquired anxiously.

"Bad news," Hatfield told him. "Ambert's dead, shot down in Belfort with all his men. Somebody's got to tell his niece and I reckon yuh're the one."

Farmon went white around the lips; he fought to maintain his self-control. "Yeah, I reckon I am," he muttered.

Gasca was shaken. "Ambert was a good hombre," he growled.

Hatfield addressed Farmon, voice low, incisive: "Tell Miss Ambert to hold her men close to the ranch. They'll get fired-up and wanta attack when they hear 'bout their boss. But hold 'em, whatever happens, till yuh hear from me."

"I savvy." Farmon's young eyes were flecked with pain, at thought of what he must tell his sweetheart.

"Get ridin'," ordered the Ranger. "I got business around Belfort tonight but I'll join yuh at the Square A soon as I can."

Farmon swung obediently, started Sal westward. Gasca and Hatfield watched him, as he dipped out of sight in the bush.

"And now, senor," said the rurale, "pairhaps you weel allow me to offaire the serveeces of my men. It weel be great honaire to work for the Lone Wolf, greates' Texas Ranger in the State."

"Callated yuh reckernized me."

"*Si.* I have heard many stories of you, and once a bandit I arres' describe you; I am train' to know faces."

Hatfield had already sized up the rurale as an efficient fighting man, and he liked his tact and frankness. "I can use yuh. Ride along with me and I'll tell yuh how."

They turned along the ridge, off the trail. . . .

Dark clouds scudded across the leaden sky, the rustling chaparral murmuring in their ears, creak of leather as the powerful horses moved

close together, the rurale listening carefully to Hatfield's instructions.

"I do eet," he promised.

"Go ahead, then. And thanks, Cap'n."

Gasca galloped rapidly southward, for the Rio Grande. Hatfield returned Goldy east, and found a high point on a ridge overlooking Belfort. Great red boulders, upheaved by a primeval force, formed shelter from the wind, and here the Ranger settled down to await the night.

"I'll attend that meetin' at the Fort," he mused.

He could look down the bushed mountain, see in the distance the palisade of the old Indian fort. Roofs of adobe shacks and barracks were visible inside the breastworks.

The Norther, tail end of which the southwest counties were getting, blew shrilly. Hatfield ate from slim bags, and between naps observed the Fort. In the dull light he perceived several riders, at different times, who circled to the west side and, turning their horses out in a corral, went inside.

"Another depot," he said aloud.

Night fell at last. Hatfield checked his guns by delicate sense of touch. Then he put on the sandy-hued Stetson he had picked up in town, and draped his poncho, protection against wind and dust, about his shoulders and waist. Well outside the Fort, he dismounted, and left Goldy hidden in a mesquite clump.

In his dangerous investigations, Jim Hatfield had many times been in danger of death. He had fought the legions of Panhandle Bandits who sought to split Texas, who thirsted for his blood when he balked them; he had smashed the pirates of the Alamita oil lands, and had seen the Rio run red with blood of victims. Now he meant to step, alone, into a den of killers, fierce gunmen marshaled by Piggy Vorberg, and seldom had he dared such almost sure annihilation. But he felt he must do what he could inside the Fort.

Close to ten-thirty, Hatfield openly walked to the west gate, as though coming from the corral.

"Who goes there?" A gun clicked with the gruff challenge.

"Okay," the Ranger growled. "Piggy 'll be right over. I'm plumb wore out."

"Yuh can snooze in that barrack," the sentry told him, deceived by the Ranger's assurance. Too, he saw a sand-hued Stetson, a slouched, muffled figure, took him to be a newly arrived recruit.

THE Ranger stalked across the grass and entered the rectangular barrack. A man swore in the darkness inside as the big fellow's boot touched him. Snores, the odor of sweaty humanity, filled the den.

With his hand he found a space close to the door, and lay down, along the wall, head toward the opening so he could watch outside.

Twenty minutes later he heard the gate guard challenge. A giant figure bulked there, and a crowd of men, muffled in ponchos or riding cloaks, followed him.

Through the moving figures, the Ranger saw for a moment a small, ruby glow, and the breeze brought to him the perfumed tobacco smoke.

Then a shrill voice rose from the center of the gang. "What's the idea of this outrage, suh?" it demanded hotly. "You know who I am, Judge Jeremiah Welles. You are committin' a heinous crime—"

"Dry up, you old windbag," shouted Vorberg, and slapped the small man impatiently. "Keep shut and listen to what I tell you or there'll be a worse crime committed here and now. You're lucky to get a chance to go along with us. We can use you, or you'd be dead already."

"This is an outrage!" another prisoner cried.

From the lantern Vorberg held up, Hatfield recognized the drawn face of Martin Bond.

"Quiet, both of you!" snarled Piggy, shoving Bond on.

The two captives were herded around the side of the barrack in which the Ranger lay. He heard the creak of a door, in a building behind the one he was in.

The officer peered toward the gate;

the sentry had resumed his seat, watching that entry. Coming up, in the darkness Hatfield slid into the open, backed close to the wall. Rounding the corner, he paused in the black shadow cast by the barrack, behind which was a square adobe house set in the middle of the enclosure.

He could see the bunch of Vorberg gunmen, intervening between him and the square buildings. Ears alert, he heard Vorberg speaking rapidly.

"Sure," he was saying, "I've got it. We'll take care of Goodel on Monday night, and that'll cinch it. The mayor's leery now and we can't take any chances with him. I'll have squads at all the polls in the three counties."

"You can count on us," a heavy voice repeated, "we won't fail."

Hatfield wanted to get closer, to identify all those who held their rapid colloquy in the darkness. He crept foot by foot, toward the back corner of the barrack, glimpsed the red glow of that cigar.

THE gate sentry's sharp challenge reached him, and the men speaking around the corner heard it, too, paused.

Someone cried, "Yuh know me, yuh fool!"

Rapid footsteps, that told him he was caught between the square hut and the newcomer, were on him. There was nothing to do but freeze against the wall, as a stout figure hustled past him.

"Oh,—hello, Piggy. Where's everybody? How yuh like the way I took care of Am—"

He had stopped, and faced the tall Ranger, mistaken the poncho-swathed figure for Vorberg's in the darkness. Now he realized his error, stuck his face close to Hatfield's.

"Hey! Help! It's him!" His fat hand started for his gun, and the Ranger's arm shot out, fingers closing on the thick wrist. A twist, a snap of bone, and the young man was on his knees, yelling for mercy. In the dim

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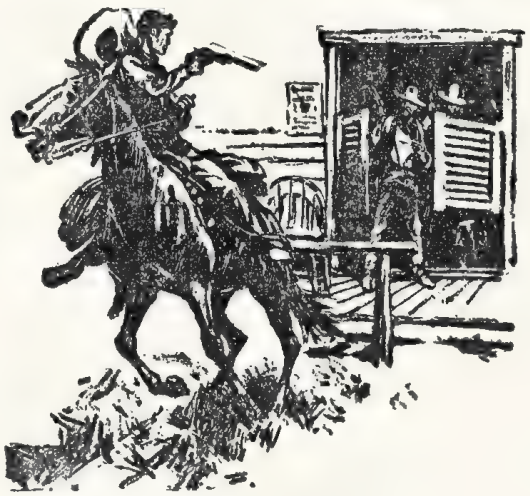

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Featuring JIM HATFIELD at His Fighting Best

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light, the gray-green eyes glowed.

There was a bandage on one of George Pennock's cheeks. "Piggy—Dad—help me," he whined frantically.

Hatfield hit him, then, a blow across the head with the barrel of his drawn six-shooter, and George folded up.

"What the hell's goin' on there?" Vorberg bellowed at the same moment.

The Ranger turned, ducked back around the barracks. Vorberg and his men rushed to the spot where George Pennock lay. Seizing those precious moments, the Ranger darted to the other end of the bararck, and slid into the open door of the square shack in which stood Judge Welles and Martin Bond, hands tied behind them, awaiting their fate.

"Outside, quick!" ordered Hatfield.

Welles' eyes lit with relief. The Ranger, jumping inside the shack, saw two gunmen guards, at either side, throwing up their pistols. His Colt boomed once, swung in a lightning arc, spoke again.

Shrieks of pain came from the shattered hombres. The others had run to George Pennock, with Vorberg, but hearing the shots, they hustled back to the shack. Hatfield shut the door, threw the wooden bar; there was a window without glass at the back, and, kicking out the lantern, he started Welles and Bond toward it.

The excited men fought to break in the door, not yet certain of what was going on. Hatfield lifted Welles through, and Bond was out; he followed quickly. Hatfield gripped the old magistrate by the arm, guiding him, while Bond trotted behind them.

The gate man, hearing the noise, had left his post, stood at the corner of the barrack, calling to his friends. Men in the big house were rousing up, as Hatfield herded Bond and Welles out the gate.

The guard glimpsed the dark. running figures, hearing the squeak of the portal. "Who's that? Stop!" A bullet nicked the palisade.

"I—can't run much farther," gasped Bond, as Hatfield urged them on.

There were plenty of horses outside, a few tethered mounts, and the animals Vorberg's band had ridden up. Hatfield seized two, cut the cords fastening the wrists of the men he had saved. He hoisted Welles into his saddle, and Bond mounted. The Ranger whistled for Goldy.

"Look out! Here they come!" shouted the excited lawyer.

Wild bullets ranged their way but the smashing reply of Hatfield's Colts kept the gate clear. Driving the other two horses ahead, he leaped on the sorrel and drove off in the darkness, up the slope among the thick bush on past the corral.

Vorberg's hombres issued from the Fort, scooping up horses with which to follow.

"Jim," gasped Welles, "I've lived a long time and may not last beyond tonight, but I never saw your equal. That was the bravest play I ever heard of."

"You're right," Bond cried.

"We were lying low at the hotel, as you ordered," Welles told the Ranger, "when suddenly they grabbed Bond and then me. Said I must work with them or they'd kill me."

Behind them, the infuriated pack, with Vorberg roaring commands, organized for the chase.

"Where to?" asked Bond.

"Callate we'll head for the Square A. Keep ridin' west, now. I'll drop back a bit and sorta disconcert 'em."

A couple of killers, on super horses, blundered on the right trail, unluckily for themselves. As they closed in, they ran onto the Lone Wolf's guns, fifty yards back from Welles and Bond.

Pistols blazed in the night, there rose the awful shrieks of men who have received the leaden message that spells death.

CHAPTER XI

Mysterious Message

THE tragic news that Jerry Farmon carried had stricken the Square A.

When he had told Louise, she had nearly fainted; he caught her in his

arms to steady her. She began to cry.

Farmon had his hands full, trying to comfort the young woman. Finally she managed to pull herself together, her pride steadying her, though the shock had dazed her.

"I'll have to tell the men," she gasped.

"Lemme do it," he offered.

She shook her head. "They'll take it best from me."

"Wait, Louise. I want to help yuh every way I kin. There's someone else workin' for us, too, and that's my pal, Jim Harris. He's got a plan in his haid, and he's the smartest hombre I ever met."

"A plan? What is it? What can help us now?"

"He didn't explain it to me, not havin' time. But he said, no matter what happens not to let yore men go on the rampage over this. Keep 'em close home. They'll be rarin' to go when they hear of yore uncle's murder."

She hesitated, looked into his eyes; he kissed her gently, and she clung to him for a moment. "All right, Jerry. Whatever you say."

He was at her side when she called Fernando, the big Mexican foreman. Face grave, Fernando sensed tragedy; he brought the Square A vaqueros in a gathering before the long hacienda veranda.

They stood, two hundred of them, all the ranch retainers who were not out on duty, guarding the range; women and children gathered on the outskirts. They doffed peaked hats, listened to the sad news their mistress imparted.

A stunned silence was their first reaction. Fernando broke it. He leaped to the steps, cried in Spanish, "Vaqueros—we ride! Revenge is all we have left. They have killed our master, John Ambert. Death to them all!"

"Stop, Fernando, quiet," ordered Louise.

She held up her hand and the crowd ceased to shout. "You must stay here, at the ranch. I need you. I want every man to swear he won't ride without my direct permission."

The feudal habit of obedience was strong in the Mexicans. Having lost Ambert, they turned full allegiance to Louise, now sole heir to the great Square A.

Women were softly sobbing, and there were others stricken at loss of their men at Belfort.

But, at their mistress's behest, they returned to their little settlement behind the hacienda.

Louise and Jerry went inside the house. Night fell, with a dark, cloud-scudding sky. The wind moaned eerily in the turreted towers. Stark horror had struck the mighty Square A, as it threatened to sweep through Texas.

ONE man stood against the threatened devastation. Farmon held hope, hope that his friend Jim Harris could do something, save the Square A, stop the civil war that kept the land in a turmoil. He sensed, more and more, the mighty Ranger's power.

When Louise went to bed, Farmon, vaguely uneasy, lay down on the floor where he could watch and guard her room. Outside, he saw a tall form, dark in the night; it was Fernando, and others formed a circle around the hacienda. The vaqueros, too, were on the alert.

The sky had cleared when the sun peeped ruby red over the vast Square A. Farmon, starting awake, heard shouts east of the house. He jumped up, ran out, into the cool of the morning. Riders were coming in from the Belfort trail, three men on dust-covered, sweated horses.

"It's Harris!" he exclaimed aloud, and hurried toward them.

Then he recognized Martin Bond, the Square A lawyer, brought there by Ambert to check up the old Spanish land grants and advise on the legal status of the troubled ranch. Bond was worn out, dusty and bedraggled, as was a tiny man who slumped on the third horse.

Farmon, for a moment, thought the small man was dead, but Judge Welles was only napping as he rode. Hatfield was close by him.

Farmon grabbed Hatfield's hand, pumped it. "Jim, mighty glad to see yuh. Yuh're plumb done in."

The tall jigger was plastered with dust, and brown, caked blood from wounds. However, he sat erect in the saddle. Dismounting he lifted Judge Welles down. The little jurist was so stiff he couldn't straighten out.

Martin Bond was terribly drawn. He raised his hand, shouted to the vaqueros who clustered around, "Men, they've murdered your master. In cold blood. I'm a man of peace but I'll fight with you now, to the last drop."

The vaqueros were ready, honing for revenge. There was a heavy murmur through the crowd.

"Yuh better get inside and rest yoreself, Bond," Hatfield ordered, shoving the excited attorney toward the house. He did not want the Mexicans to be egged on into a blind struggle.

Welles grunted, mumbled, as willing hands helped him and Bond to their rooms.

"C'mon in and have some grub and a drink, Jim," said Jerry. "Then yuh can sleep, too."

Hatfield nodded. Expert wranglers took the golden sorrel and other horses, to wash them, rub them down, and feed them. The Ranger cleaned up at the pump outside, and strolled into the warm, roomy kitchen. Food awaited him, and Farmon sat down with him.

AS they were eating, Fernando came in, saluted Farmon. "Señor, one of our men, Celestino, sent to the railroad by Senor Ambert before he die', has come back. He has telegram but say' Senor Ambert tol' heem to han' it to no one but himself. Since Senor Ambert ees dead, Celestino refuse to geeve eet to any but Senorita Ambert—he like mule."

"Okay," Farmon answered, "Reckon she'll take it."

He rose and went up front, returning presently with Louise, whose pale face and troubled eyes showed she had been grieving over her uncle's death. Fernando ushered in a squat peon, very dark, a man more than half Indian.

"What have you, Celestino?" Louise asked in soft Spanish.

Humbled he swept his peaked hat off. Bowing to the floor, he muttered in his native tongue, "Señorita, that I don't know. But my master said to hand it to no one but himself."

From inside the wide red sash he extracted a yellow envelope which he handed direct to Louise, thus literally fulfilling to the best of his ability the command of his dead employer. Louise opened it; her pretty forehead puckered as she read it.

"I don't understand. You read it, Jerry."

Farmon took the wire, which said:

"FIVE TEN ONE FORTY FIVE LIGHT HAIR STREAKED GREY WEDGE SCAR UNDER LEFT EYE STOP!"

The waddy was puzzled. "It ain't signed. See kin yuh make anything of it, Jim."

Hatfield looked over the wire. He shrugged. "It's a description of somebody and comes from Austin. There's no sayin' who they're talkin of." In colloquial Spanish he asked Celestino, "Your master sent you to the railroad with a message?"

Before replying, Celestino glanced at Louise as though for permission to speak. She nodded. "Tell us everything," she commanded.

"Si, he sent me." Sweat stood on the peon's brow; he was dull but very loyal, a man to depend on.

"What was the message?" asked the Ranger.

Celestino shrugged. "I know not. I handed it to the station senor. My master said to wait for a reply and to tell nobody."

"Maybe Mr. Bond 'd know," suggested Farmon. "When he wakes up, we'll ask him."

"We'll ask him now," declared the big jigger. "I got to be headin' back pronto, Farmon."

The attorney had thrown himself down on his bed without taking off his boots. He started up as Farmon and the tall Ranger tapped at his door.

"Come in."

Jerry handed him the telegram. Bond, after reading it, shook his head.

"A description of somebody, I don't know who. Perhaps some criminal Ambert suspected; he was constantly in touch with the governor by wire."

His face was grim as he went on, "What will Miss Ambert do now, Farmon? There's no justice here for the Square A. That vote must be controlled Tuesday, for once the condemnation statute is passed it will be too late. I'd hoped we could make the people of the country see reason but I was wrong. The mob's in full control, evil men have the upper hand. I'll be glad to stay here and help, if you wish to fight."

FARMON glanced at the tall man, who said, "We'll go easy on fightin', till we know who to fight, Bond. An attack now by Square A vaqueros 'll finish the job for shore."

Bond nodded. "You may be right. You saved my life, and I'm very grateful. I think, however, since there's nothing more I can do here, I'd best leave for the capitol and see the governor; perhaps he can do something to check this lawlessness."

"While yuh're at the station," Farmon told him, "yuh can check up on that telegram, Bond, and send us back a copy of it by the vaqueros who escort yuh."

"I'll do that. I'll have to rest before I can start."

The two young men went out, and Hatfield finished his meal. Farmon was keyed up, wondered at the cool demeanor of the big jigger he knew as Jim Harris. He carefully ticketed all of Jim's instructions.

The Ranger rested for a time, the short sleep restoring his tremendous power. Judge Welles, having slept and eaten, received Hatfield in his room, and Farmon, waiting outside, heard the low murmur of their voices.

"Yes, suh, I'll be there." the magistrate said, as the tall man took his leave. "Count on me."

Farmon went out with his friend, while Hatfield saddled up, checked his six-guns, and gave him parting orders.

"Got it?" he asked, as he swung the sorrel toward the east.

"I got it."

With a wave of his hand, the Ranger trotted Goldy away from the hacienda, and Farmon watched him climb the slope, and drop out of sight.

Jerry returned to the house. Martin Bond had risen, was packing his bag. A saddled horse was brought for the attorney, who hoped by seeing the governor to salvage the Square A from threatened partition, perhaps check the civil war and avert the bloody battle that loomed.

The lawyer took his leave of Jerry and Louise, waved farewell to the vaqueros, two of whom rode with him to the railroad, miles north.

Jerry rested through siesta time. The sun was still warm, touching the west hills, when shots roused him, and he rushed out, buckling on his gunbelt, to see men in sandy sombreros up on the eastern ridge. They were shooting at long range down at the hacienda, yelling taunts at the angry Mexicans. Fernando already had his fighters out, preparing to rout the invaders.

WITH difficulty Farmon prevented the vaqueros from charging out to do battle. He made them take cover and only one man was hit, his arm cut by a spent bullet.

"They want us to run out," Farmon told Fernando. "We'll stand pat." That was what Jim had ordered and he meant to carry out his instructions.

After an hour of desultory shooting, seeing they could not draw the vaqueros into a fight, the attackers left.

Louise ate supper with Jerry and Judge Welles. Welles was stronger after his rest and entertained the young people with varied stories.

Late that night the two Mexicans who had accompanied Martin Bond to the railroad returned, bringing Louise a message:

"The wire sent by your uncle was to the Chief of Police, Austin, asking for the description of a man he evidently suspected. Here is a copy of his wire: 'Wire immediately description of Harry Keith wanted for murder in Austin. Think he's in Belfort. Confidential, Ambert.' Good luck in your fight. I'll wire as soon as I see the governor."

"Uncle John said our enemies were bringing in killers and gunmen," Louise remarked. "I suppose he read about this Keith in an Austin paper, and perhaps saw him in Belfort, wanted to make sure."

Brooding quiet enveloped the great ranch. Outside, Fernando's vaquero guards silently patrolled, watching over their mistress.

War, death, hung close upon them, about to break into a mad fantasy of bloodshed, to smash and destroy.

CHAPTER XII

A Man Turns the Tide

IN the night the ominous crew of killers rode down the river trail. Against the lighter sky, powdered with stars and silvered by a piece of moon, peaked sombreros showed. Faint tinklings came from the conchas adorning their hats and trappings.

The leader, a giant slouched on a big black, halted and the fifty with him drew up, rear riders bunching to hear his final orders.

"That's Goodel's place, boys, you can see the light. He's only got three or four men around, and they're sleepin' in the back. Now go to it. Manuel, make sure they get a good look at you."

"*Si*," growled Manuel, a big vaquero. He wore the Square A peaked hat, the crimson sash, bulking six-guns and long knife.

The horsemen splashed across the shallows of a ford, climbed the bank.

Close to the flat-roofed wooden house, home of Honest Ben Goodel, mayor of Belfort and leading merchant of the countryside, they dismounted, and, leaving men to hold the horses, the killers stealthily crept afoot through the shadows of the trees.

Inside the cozy living-room, Ben Goodel sat, reading an Austin newspaper by the light of a large oil lamp. His wife, a stout, comfortable appearing woman of middle age, sat sewing on a gingham dress. One of Goodel's stalwart sons, a young fellow of twenty, sat on a couch at the side of the room, mending a harness.

This scene of domestic felicity was shattered by a harsh command, the voice accented:

"Goodel—the Square A ees come for revenge! You keeled our master John Ambert, you and your frien's."

The startled people looked up, to see in the doorway a terrifying figure, in black peaked hat trimmed with silver A's, short velvet jacket, crimson sash. The vaquero's angry face, black eyes glowing in the center red as coals, fixed them, terrified the woman.

She screamed shrilly. "Don't—don't shoot," she begged, for the Mexican had a revolver cocked, pointed at her husband.

Young Tom Goodel leaped to his feet, ignoring danger to himself, to try to save his father. Glass smashed at the side, a rifle barrel was thrust through the window.

"Death to the foes of the Square A!" A shrill Mexican voice yelled.

Honest Ben faced his fate bravely, without flinching, eyes straight on the man in the door. "Manuel," he growled, "I know yuh, seen yuh with the Square A riders. I've allus bin a friend of the Amberts; I didn't kill yore boss. In fact, the way he was shot down made me think some, and I bin workin' for yuh, not against yuh—"

"Don't—don't shoot!" That was Mrs. Goodel again, crying for mercy, for the big Colt, hammer spur back under Manuel's brown thumb, deliberately pinned her husband's heart. Manuel's white teeth gritted.

YOUNG Tom Goodel sprang to get between the gun barrel and his father; the rifle at the side roared and the youth was spun around, a sharp crack of breaking bone sounding. He fell with a grunt of pain and his mother leaped up, ran to kneel beside him, sobbing.

The vaquero in the doorway took fatal aim on Ben. A revolver blared. Manuel's weapon exploded, but the slug missed Goodel by a yard as the heavy pistol suddenly wavered. The

bullet from Manuel's gun cut up splinters from the floor, and the vaquero crashed on his face, a hole between his fierce eyes.

The rifleman who had hit Tom Goodel uttered a screech of agony, and the long barrel slid from the window.

From behind Goodel, bullets roared past, ripping through the open door and the windows. The merchant, aware someone had saved his life, jumped back to protect his wife and son, and as he turned he saw the big man who had come to snatch them from death. He recognized the tall jigger he had seen at the courtroom, Cactus Charlie's captor, supposedly Judge Welles' bodyguard.

"Thanks, stranger," he gasped.

The Ranger was busy, guns blastin the front. A bullet knocked the lamp out, plunging them in darkness, to prevent the men outside from finding a target. The whole mob was closing in for the attack.

"Goodel, get yore son into that back room," Hatfield ordered, close to the three.

Several armed men, employes of Goodel, burst into the back door, calling to their boss.

Hatfield, who had earlier concealed himself outside, awaiting the coming of the murderers, sidled toward an exit.

"Don't go out, there's a hull passel of them Square A devils there," cried Goodel, seeing the bulk of the Ranger in the open doorway.

But the tall jigger leaped out. Up front he could see the mass of the killers, infuriated at the shooting of Manuel, the ruination of their plot to kill Goodel and so enrage the whole country against the Square A that there would be no doubt about the condemnation vote, no more talk of conciliation.

The bulk of a stone side stoop afforded Hatfield enough shelter as he opened a heavy fire against the attackers. Their bullets ripped back hatred and death, striking the stone, tearing his hat and clothing, gripping at his flesh.

Goodel's aides began to shoôt from the living-room windows. Their fire, with the masterful, devastating six-guns of Jim Hatfield, smashed the ranks of the gunmen. Cursing with confused fury, they broke and ran for the horses, leaving four of their bunch dead in front of the house, while half a dozen more carried Ranger lead away with them.

Hatfield, following them up, picked off another as the bunch ran helter-skelter through the trees for their mounts. He trailed them, to make sure they were in full retreat, and were crossing the river, before he strolled back to Goodel's.

The merchant, most powerful leader of decent men in the countryside, was on the front porch, with a lighted lantern. "Who's that?" he called.

"Yore friend," the Ranger told him.

Goodel put down the lantern, held out a hand. "Dunno exactly who yuh are, mister, or why yuh done this for us, but I want to tell yuh I'll never forget it and that anything you say goes with me. The Square A would've finished me tonight, damn 'em. From now on the honest folks in this section 'll be against 'em, if I have anything to say. My pore boy's got a busted hip from a Square A bullet and he's sufferin' bad. Thank God he ain't dead; yore shootin' purvented that."

HATFIELD shook Goodel's hand. Honest Ben was an upright leader, whom people would follow.

The Ranger had taken this chance to convince Goodel once and for all what went on beneath the surface in the great land touched by the Square A.

It had been a dangerous play, but he had timed it with the mastery of his clever brain, and he had won.

"Glad I got up in time," he told the merchant. "I heard them fellers talkin' 'bout what they meant to do to yuh and come out to stop it. But yuh're on the wrong trail, Goodel; that wasn't the Square A."

Goodel frowned, picked up the lantern, swung it over the dead Manuel. "But I know this vaquero; he's a Square A rider."

"That's right, he is, one of a handful who jined the string or were bribed

over, to fool people," Hatfield told him earnestly. "That's why Piggy Vorberg done shoved Manuel up front to do the shootin', so's yore wife 'd swear it was a Square A gang." He himself had seen Manuel before, once as a rider with Cactus Charlie, who had ridden back to the Square A, another time the night he had clashed with Mireles, when Manuel had come in to whisper to John Ambert—whisper a lie.

Ben Goodel was confused. Hatfield took the light, led him to the yard. At the side lay the rifleman who had wounded Tom Goodel. Hatfield pulled off the bandanna mask, the peaked sombrero decorated with Square A's. The hair was light-brown, face stained only above the mask line.

"Why, I know him," exclaimed Goodel. "That's Gregg Olsen who once held up my store in Rio Springs." And he recognized another dead raider, a Mexican, a notorious rustler from below the Rio Grande. A fourth was an evil looking Texan, the others Mexes Goodel could not identify as Square A vaqueros.

Goodel straightened, lips set. "Reckon we been fooled plenty, mister. Like yuh said, they had a few traitors to front 'em, the rest was disguised outlaws from Mexico, who rode masked. I did get leery when yuh showed up Cactus Charlie and Ambert was kilt, but this would have set us wrong agin. My wife and boy would've swore it was the Square A. I'll ride to Belfort tomorrow and have it out with Piggy Vorberg, damn him."

Hatfield shook his head. "Marshal yore friends, but keep 'em away from Belfort, savvy? It ain't as simple as yuh think."

Goodel was ready to obey. After a quick outline of his campaign and detailed instructions as to the rôle the citizens might play, Honest Ben nodded.

"Okay, I'll start trusted men right now, and get in touch with the mayors of Rio Springs and in Pecos. They're salty hombres and 'll take my word for it."

Hatfield shook hands, called the sorrel. Then he rode for Belfort, hub of the terrible trouble gripping southwest Texas.

He knew he was far from victory. The mighty juggernaut of the enemy was gathering momentum, and though he had delivered several well-placed checks, the threatened clash might well end up in wholesale destruction.

"Got to break 'em up," he mused.

He was lining up what forces he could marshal for the decisive fight he knew must take place. Such a wolf pack as Vorberg had brought in, let loose on the land, would devastate an entire district if not smashed.

From a distance the Ranger sat his sorrel, and, through the interstices of tall mesquite, looked down the slope at the big barn where he had so nearly met death. He watched the killers who had sought to slay the Goodels as they straggled up to the hideout. . . .

INSIDE the barn, Piggy Vorberg swore with red fury as he was forced to report failure.

"It was that big devil!" he raved, stamping his huge spurred boot so the rafters shook. "He was lying in wait for us, Chief. Someone spilt the beans and he gunned us, saved Goodel. I don't know what it'll mean if it comes out. Goodel's already suspicious of us on account of that court play. We need citizen votes in all three counties to carry the elections."

A red cigar end glowed in the dimness. A cold voice said, "Calm down, Piggy. They'll find Manuel's body, won't they, in Square A clothes?"

"Yeah and they'll find Olsen's and that lousy Mex cattle thief's! What then?"

"If we have to, we'll put it through by force. We've enough fighters to do it. The Square A 'll try to vote, and when the riots begin, we'll shoot down some citizens and start 'em fightin'. We can slip in ballots to make the election ours. Our squads in Rio Springs and Pecos can handle those polls. As for that big jigger, we'll see him. He's a Texas Ranger or a State investigator sent here by Austin."

Fresh confidence surged through the plotters at the cold logic of their chief. Bottles clinked as they drank

a toast to lawlessness and its profits, to the blood they spilled on the body of Texas. . . .

A dark statue in the night, Hatfield kept his lonely vigil. He could not approach close enough to overhear any talk; since he had crept into their stronghold that other night, they kept sentries well out.

He glimpsed muffled forms of men who left the barn, slipped into the back door of the house on Main.

Hatfield made a wide circle that took him around the north end of Main, rode along the east side, looking across at the house with the large barn behind it, filled with gunmen. The enemy was resting for the morrow, Election Day, when the terrible blow would be dealt law and order in the state, and a new Crime Empire would form that would raid the great holdings of Texas ranchers, life blood of industry.

The town was still lighted gaily. Men were drinking in the saloons, the sounds of a piano rang on the cool night air. Women's voices could be heard as cowboys and citizens whirled in the gyrations of the dance at the hall next the Alamo saloon. Heavily armed men swarmed Belfort—men who honed to kill Hatfield.

KEEPING to the shadows, avoiding contact with men who were going home, he patrolled Main Street. He could look through the open doorways of the dance hall.

After a time he saw fat George Pennock, dancing with a dainty blonde in a silver dress, red flower in her hair. George's face was still bandaged; his eyes were glazed from the whiskey he had been drinking, he could hardly stay on his feet as the girl lugged him around the floor to the tinny strains of the piano and violin.

Hatfield rolled himself a cigarette, settled himself to wait. It was around one o'clock when George emerged, staggering, managed to find his horse and get aboard. The horse knew the way home and walked north, Pennock sagging in the saddle.

Hatfield threw away his cigarette stub, and pushed the sorrel out into the stout youth's path.

"Look out there," said Pennock drunkenly. "My horse is—I mean—" He was so stupefield that he did not recognize the tall jigger till Hatfield was right upon him.

Rocking in his saddle, George hardly could stay on his horse. The cool fresh air after the smoke-filled atmosphere of the dance hall, had hit him hard. But the grim face of the hombre whose steely eyes penetrated his soul, jolted him back to a degree of sobriety. His face twisted with terror and a pudgy hand flicked to the six-shooter resting on his thigh.

"Say, get outa here, yuh—" began George.

Drunk as he was, the young man made a draw but never fired a shot, for the Ranger's fingers vised on his wrist. George gave a screech of pain at twisted knuckles, trapped in the trigger guard, as Hatfield wrested the pistol away and stuck it in his own belt.

PENNOCK dug a spur into his horse, which shied away. The terrific yank, however, instead of unseating the Ranger, pulled George from his saddle and he hung, legs kicking dust under the golden sorrel's belly.

"Cut it out. Ouch. Leggo," gasped George. The efficient force of the Ranger devastated him, his bleary eyes shot red fright, pasty face working. Desperately he lashed out with his left hand.

Three hombres in sand-hued hats heard his yells for help, hard-eyed men whose smooth gun butts showed they were used to handling them. They came running across the street, shouting to their mates who crowded the saloons and walks. Colts were quickly drawn, for instant use.

Hatfield had only a few moments in which to complete his dangerous play. He hit George in the other eye, blacking it to match the one Ambert had given the fat youth. Stunned, Pennock began to whimper and beg for mercy.

"What's goin' on there?" bawled a gunman, and fired a shot over the Ranger.

With a sweep of his powerful body, the Ranger lifted Pennock off his feet, back onto the tame horse's saddle. He turned, his pistol blasting furiously at his gathering enemies, men he recognized as Piggy Vorberg's henchmen. One took lead and curled up in the dust of the road.

The yells, the shots, brought more and more men, concentrating on him. The sweep of a Ranger gun barrel knocked Pennock completely senseless; the officer started west, leading the other horse, as he combed the gunmen in the road with his accurate fire.

Out of the light, he made swift time, cutting behind the stables and disappearing in the chaparral. Under a starry sky, he climbed the ridge overlooking Belfort.

Once away he made camp, among bushed rocks. Securing his captive carefully, he lay down to sleep.

On the morrow he must face an army of foes, men determined to win fortunes by smashing the decent folk of Texas, men whose guns never cooled. He must be fresh, ready for the greatest struggle of his career as a Texas Ranger.

Whether he won or not depended on the keen brain, on the swiftness of his guns.

CHAPTER XIII

Election Day

THE red sun woke the Ranger. Instantly alert he rose, looked over George Pennock. The young man was fully sober, eyes rolling with fright.

Hatfield deliberately drew a Colt, opened it, looked over the cartridges in the chambers. He drew the hammer spur back under the second joint of his thumb, and swung the muzzle George's way. Pennock began to shake violently; he mumbled through his gag, eyes begging for his life.

Satisfied with this experiment as to George's courage, which he had previously rightly sized up, Hatfield, as though reluctantly, let the big pistol slide back into its holster. He turned his back on Pennock and began to eat a quick breakfast.

The sun was growing warmer, thawing out stiffened muscles. But Pennock, tied tightly, could not loosen up. After a while Hatfield removed the gag from George's lips; they were dry, and Pennock had to swallow several gulps of water before he could talk.

"What's the idee, mister? What yuh mean to do?" he whispered hoarsely. "These ropes 're killin' me."

Hatfield was squatted by him and blue clouds of cigarette smoke wreathed the strong face. "I've arrested yuh, Pennock," he told the youth coldly, "for murder."

"Yuh—yuh're loco!" gasped George. "Yuh can't prove nuthin' on me. My father's got too much power in these parts and yuh'll be damn sorry for this."

Hatfield shrugged. George was still defiant, banking on his father's influence. The Ranger went and brought the horses, rested by a night's grazing, and slung his prisoner across the tame mount. He rode Goldy down toward the main trail running west through gaps over hills, to the Square A.

Crows flew swiftly off, away from the trail ahead. The Ranger drew back with George, into the bush, placed a strong hand over the quivering mouth—a weak mouth that Hatfield had taken into consideration when he had picked young Pennock for this play.

Presently a brown horse came into view, and in the saddle sat Judge Jeremiah Welles. Hatfield stepped Goldy out on the trail and the little magistrate greeted the Ranger joyfully.

"There you are, suh! And here I am, right on the dot as you wished, and rosy as a bud this fine mornin'. What you-all got there?"

"Judge," Hatfield told him gravely, "this here's a drygulcher, the murderer of John Ambert. He shot Ambert as he passed the county commissioner's office window."

Welles' face grew stern. "You desire to hold court on him here and now?"

"Yeah, Judge."

"Let's hear your evidence, then."

"I was right behind Ambert when he went down," the Ranger reported. "A bullet from that winder went through his side. I glimpsed this snake's face for a moment and fired quick, yuh kin see where my slug nicked his cheek. The angle was too sharp to get him right."

"He's lyin'," cried George. "I never did it. My father's county commissioner—"

Hatfield broke in. "Ambert punched Pennock when he tried to drygulch Jerry Farmon. But that ain't the main reason he killed Ambert. He had orders to do so. Mebbe yuh'd go easy on him if he'll tell what he knows, 'bout the gunmen hid in his father's barn, and so on."

"Yuh can't scare me," sneered George, bracing himself. "I'm entitled to a fair trial."

Hatfield nodded to Welles, who said icily, "George Pennock, I hereby pronounce you guilty of first-degree murder and sentence you to hang by the neck till you are daid."

George began to shake. "Yuh—yuh can't do it!" he gasped. "You can't—"

"In times like these," intoned the judge, "due processes of law must sometimes be skipped. I hereby authorize you to carry out the sentence of this here court."

HATFIELD reached out, took his lariat from its hook. He began to uncoil it, and checked the noose. There was a tall live-oak handy and he tossed the free end over a branch.

"Get up on yore horse, Pennock. Judge, yuh give the word to make it all legal."

Pennock's eyes rolled, tears streaked the dirt-encrusted cheeks. The feel of the rawhide around his bare neck broke him completely.

"I'll—tell yuh anything, if yuh won't hang me."

A voice called softly from the trail, "Hey, Jim—" Ben Goodel appeared, with half a dozen of his trusted men.

"C'mere and listen, Goodel," the Ranger ordered. Goodel had kept the rendezvous arranged the night before, at the merchant's home.

"Got my men ready," Goodel growled, staring at the white-faced Pennock.

Hatfield glared at Pennock. "Why'd yuh murder John Ambert?"

"I—I was sore 'cause he punched me. But I wouldn't 've killed him if Russ Dowd hadn't ordered me to. Dowd said Ambert was gittin' dangerous and hadda be put outa the way."

"Dowd—Russ Dowd," repeated the Ranger. "Why, he's that killer escaped from the train, the one Farmon's pal Cole was huntin'. Is he round here?"

"Shore he is. He's chief of the whole—" Pennock broke off, gulped, fearfully eyed the tall jigger.

On the right trail, the Ranger relentlessly pressed Pennock, and Welles, expert at cross-examination, helped pump George dry, while Goodel listened in open-mouthed amazement.

Two hours later, shots and yells from eastward told Hatfield that Belfort was waking to Election Day.

"Hold this feller under yore guns, Judge," ordered Hatfield. "Shoot him dead if he tries to bust loose. When Farmon comes, pass George to him. And don't forget to have a rider sent to the railroad station."

Welles took his orders. Goodel had left an hour before to hurry and execute his. The Ranger mounted and waved a hand as he headed for Belfort.

In the Chaparral Metropolis, gunmen patrolled the streets, lounged in saloons; the continuous wooden awnings on Main looked like an anthill. A crowd had collected around the Town Hall, were the voting poll. was. A big sign outside announced: NO MEXES CAN VOTE IN THIS ELECTION!

THE giant Piggy Vorberg, alert, stood on the stoop. The courtroom was set with tables and ready for the voters, with Commissioner Hiram Pennock in charge. In Rio Springs, in Pecos, free citizens were preparing to exercise their franchise.

Jim Hatfield, who was fighting to separate the wheat from the chaff, girded himself for a terrific struggle.

After a long distance look to make

sure the enemy hordes were in position, he turned along the ridge, and approached the old Indian fort southwest of Belfort, keeping to the mesquite.

A big bunch of saddled horses was held outside the grass corral, mounted men watching them. Inside, Hatfield knew, outlaws brought up from Mexico filled the buildings.

"George shore come in handy," he thought. By fast, clever work he had driven to the heart of the trouble, marked the leaders, made his plans for fight. Pennock had topped off his acquired information.

Making certain all was as Pennock claimed, he went to look west, along the winding trail to the Square A. He glimpsed sentries, in sandy Stetsons, Vorberg's spies watching for the expected approach of the Square A vaqueros to vote at Belfort.

The trail cut through a narrow gap in the ridge, between high rock walls, south of where he lurked. It was a perfect spot for an ambush, which Hatfield had noted the first time he had traveled the road. On his side the top was bare of bush, but on the south brink were ledges screened by thick clumps of chaparral rising in steps to the ridge summit.

A large dust haze rose in the westward sky. Hatfield, well concealed, looking from left to right, first at the Fort, then to the trail, saw Vorberg's scouts come galloping back.

On an upper ledge, across the road, the sun glinted scintillatingly on metal, and the Ranger muttered a curse. But the sentinels were riding hell-for-leather toward the Fort and did not catch this telltale sign.

Hatfield squatted low, and, taking advantage of every rock and bush, approached as close as possible to the bare north ledge over the trail. The horsemen had reached the Fort, were reporting.

Gunmen hidden inside began to emerge, spewing out of the gate, leaping on the waiting horses. Three hundred of them, rifles and pistols filled and ready, a horde of murderous killers who would give no mercy, rustlers and wanted criminals from below the Line, from surrounding territories, imported by Vorberg and his mates.

"Pennock shore come in handy," Hatfield thought again, for it was George who had spilled the enemy plans.

The gunmen, dregs of humanity, hustled west for the ambush. Coming to the constricted part of the trail, a hundred remained in their saddles, to charge and cut up fugitives; two hundred, carrying their Winchesters and with bodies heavily crossed by spare belts of ammunition, dismounted and climbed up to the lower ledges, screened behind the bushes and rocks.

The Ranger watched the unfolding of the strategy, holding back till the instant to strike.

The Square A van hit the west mouth of the pass, started through. Two hundred screened guns rose, waiting till the vaqueros should be trapped within the pass.

The sudden, stunning roar of rifles smashed the wilderness quiet. Frightened birds winged from the bush, rapidly leaving the vicinity where men locked in hate.

So heavy was the firing that the air was shattered, bursts of explosions piercing the ears, shaking the nerves.

"Sorta surprised 'em," muttered Hatfield.

BUT it was not the Square A which was surprised by that first terrible death volley. Two Mexicans in the van had gone down. But, from a ledge above the screened gunmen in their sand-hued hats, grim-faced citizens leaped up, shooting into the enemy.

"Goodel's men 're doin' fine," mused Hatfield, as he quickly headed for the brink over the pass. He had planned to use Goodel's fighters to cut off the Fort gunmen. The ambush the killers had planned for the Square A, exposed by George Pennock, fitted in perfectly.

The Square A, warned ahead of time, had their guns out; whooping, the vaqueros began to shoot up at the sandy Stetsons, who had been riddled by Goodel's fire. The two hundred gunmen were entirely exposed to the

citizens' guns, on higher ground. They were entirely occupied by the stunning rear attack, as one after another took death lead. Killers rolled off the rocks, dead or wounded, striking in the trail below, where the Square A arrested them.

Ben Goodel's tall figure could be seen through the clouds of gunsmoke, the dust rising thicker and thicker. His hombres poured their devastating fire into the rattled gunmen, picking off fifty in the first two minutes, before the sandy hats realized how untenable was their position. A scattered volley replied to Goodel, but most of the killers quit, leaped over into the trail, to be picked up by the vaqueros.

Gun to gun, the fighting continued. The hundred mounted men surged forward to attack the Square A.

Now Hatfield was over them, squatting on the steep brink to the north. Winchester in hand, he began to cut out the leaders of the mounted gunmen. The hot battle surged in the narrow pass.

The terrible fire of Hatfield, knocking over their leaders, slowed the charge of the hundred. Goodel's men had driven the horde from the lip of the ledge, and were hurrying down to help finish up, as the Square A charged.

The Ranger's bullets cut the gunmen ranks, and the sweated, desperate-eyed hombres, at the end of the killer trail, rattled and smashed by the officer's vital strategy, broke altogether. Those in front turned, tried to retreat, bumping into their mates.

Hatfield hustled east, where he could command the trail to Belfort. Following up orders, Goodel's hombres swung down on the other side. The avenging bullets of the Law turned the remaining gunmen away from Belfort. South was the trail to Old Mexico and the shattered remnants of killers, spurs gouging blood from mustang flanks, took it. Utter rout ensued, every man for himself, those who fell trampled under cutting hoofs of their pals. The fugitives from justice brought in by Vorberg headed for the chaparral.

The sudden quiet that fell, only broken by a single shot now and then as Goodel's men fanned the killers on, was stunning. The powder-smoke and dust slowly rolled up into the hot air.

The Square A had lost two dozen vaqueros; Goodel's citizens had fared better. Dead and wounded gunmen, Vorberg's fighters, strewed the floor of the pass and the rocks above, while prisoners who had thrown down their weapons and raised their hands were being herded into a bunch by the Mexicans.

Hatfield found Goldy and cut down to the east mouth of the pass, as Fernando and Goodel mustered their followers. The mighty Ranger taking the lead, they headed at full speed for Belfort.

Piggy Vorberg sat a big horse at the center of the plaza. The heavy gunfire from the west had been heard in town, but Vorberg had ascribed it to the destruction of the Square A.

Vorberg, watched the west line of buildings, expecting to see his triumphant band swinging back to help in town. Suddenly he recognized the tall jigger on the golden sorrel as Hatfield cut out and headed straight for him.

CHAPTER XIV

Belfort

VORBERG uttered a horrified yelp. It took but a brief further glance to recognize Ben Goodel, on the Ranger's left flank with a hundred fighting citizens of Terrell, and on the other side, the grim-faced vaqueros of the Square A.

"Hey! Somethin' wrong," shrieked Piggy, and spurred his horse for the Town Hall. "This way, boys!" He rode full tilt along the walk, calling out the gunmen who had taken over the town.

Hiram Pennock, cigar clenched in his teeth, waddled from the Hall.

Fighters were rushing to rally around Vorberg. These were the men from Pennock's big barn.

Scattered shots spanged, across the shaded plaza, as the Ranger led the cohorts of right at the killers.

"Spread out, half circle," commanded Hatfield.

The vaqueros, master riders, swung into fighting formation. Goodel's friends, decent men, ranchers and cowhands, townsmen, fighting for the Law, spread the other arc.

The battle opened, hot and heavy. Men were hit, and several of Hatfield's following fell from their saddles. Dust pulped up under the beating mustang hoofs and the fierce cries of warring men interspersed the gunfire.

Hatfield pushed the swift sorrel straight for the Town Hall. Piggy Vorberg, in command of his men, bellowed to them to take cover; they squatted behind posts, and others ran inside the buildings. Hiram Pennock was among the first to disappear.

"Dismount!" shouted the Ranger.

Vaqueros and citizens hit the dirt running, charging with blasting guns at the Town Hall.

Nothing could stop that charge, of men who knew they were right, who were beating off criminals who sought to take over their government. Gunmen, rattled by the loss of half their faction outside the town, jumped up to run for Tin Can Alley. Those inside, seeing their pals retreating, deserted the front windows to follow suit. Again, stunned by the Ranger's might and clever strategy, the fight turned into a rout, as killers grabbed horses and pounded south out of town for the chaparral.

On foot, six-gun in hand, Hatfield was the first to reach the Town Hall stoop. Piggy Vorberg had turned to run, as his men began to desert, and, inside the hall, Hatfield saw the giant, face twisted in hate as he sought to escape through the back doors.

From Commissioner Pennock's office a bullet tore through Hatfield's shirt, and burned a path across his ribs. The Ranger's slug, aim disturbed by the lead from the office, clipped the heel off Piggy Vorberg's disappearing boot as Vorberg swung out of sight.

Hatfield felt the warm blood coursing down his thigh; he fired into the office, heard a grunt of pain. Close to the open window, through which he was trying to climb, Hiram Pennock lurched heavily, fell to the floor.

FULL-TILT, Hatfield roared down the corridor, on Vorberg's trail. At the turn, he slid to a stop, spurs ripping the floor, for Vorberg crouched there, awaiting him. Eyes locked, challenged, in enmity that could only burn out in the death of one or the other. The two guns blared, almost as one.

Hatfield staggered, instinctively clawing at his bullet-punctured shoulder. The wall caught him before he fell, a miasma of red death enveloping him, clouding his eyes.

Piggy Vorberg squatted there as though paralyzed, gun still up as it had fired. Then he rolled over, doubled into a great ball of dead flesh, half his face blown in by the Ranger's final slug.

Shots and yells of triumph told that the vaqueros and citizens had won.

Hatfield, half blind, was groping a way back to Pennock's office. As he entered, approached the squat, fat man, Hiram scowled up at him.

"Where—where's George?" he demanded. "What've you done with him?"

A whiskey bottle stood on the desk, and Hatfield seized it, took a drink. He shook his head, to clear the mists of pain that racked him.

"The jig's up, Pennock," he muttered. "I want Russ Dowd.

The little eyes snapped. The fat man's mouth shut tight, stubbornly, he shook his head.

Judge Welles hurried in. "Jim! You all right?"

"Shore, I'm okay.

"You've done a swell job, suh. That strategy was perfect. I'll hold court at once so your friends can bring in their prisoners for disposal."

Fernando and Ben Goodel pushed in. Goodel reported, "It's all over. They've taken to the chaparral and 're

headin' back to Mexico. Our men in Rio Springs and Pecos 'll smash what gangs they have there. Most of 'em were around Belfort. Haven't located Russ Dowd yet."

"Nor have we, senor," said Fernando, blood staining a brown cheek.

"Fetch George Pennock."

Hiram tried to rise, sank back with a groan. "You—can't touch my son.

George was brought in, shoved along by grinning vaqueros. Judge Welles, at a nod from Hatfield, said sternly, "Lock this murderer up. I'll sign the necessary papers now."

"He got me, for Ambert's shootin', Dad," cried George. "I hadda talk. He's a Texas Ranger, like we finally guessed."

Goodel, Welles, stared at the tall man, who slowly extracted from its secret pocket the silver star set on a silver circle, and pinned it to his vest.

"A Ranger!" exclaimed Goodel. "That explains some of it, but yuh're the best I ever heard of."

"My name's Jim Hatfield; I come down to settle this fuss, gents."

"Now look here, Ranger." Hiram Pennock cried, "George only did what he was told. Russ Dowd made him kill Ambert and it was Dowd who forced this whole game on me."

Hatfield nodded. "I savvy that, but I want Dowd. Where is he? And tell me 'bout how yuh come to hook up with him."

"Please, Dad," begged George. "He'll go easy on me if yuh help him."

Hiram Pennock swore. "No use trying to hide any longer."

LED by the Lone Wolf, he began to talk:

"Dowd's hit the trail for Coahuila, Ranger. He saw we were losing and I glimpsed him half an hour back, heading south on a fast horse.

"I did five years in Kansas state prison with Dowd. I was freed first, came here to start again. Got into politics and was finally elected County Commissioner. A few weeks back I was riding over to the Square A with a lawyer named Martin Bond who came from the east to check up on Square A land titles. I was friendly with the Amberts, as George loved Louise. Bond came to my office, as I'm land commissioner.

"Riding west, we were on Square A range when a man suddenly jumped out of the bushes and yelled 'Fred!'—my real name's Fred Pennyl. It was Russ Dowd. He'd just murdered a deputy sheriff who was chasing him for a killing up north. I had been doing well, had plenty of money—all I ever took was a split now and then on a land deal that might be called shady—but I was afraid of Dowd, he was always a tough one, a killer.

"Dowd looked wild; he hadn't shaved for days and his clothes were ripped, he had stolen guns on. 'I want help,' he told me. 'I'm hunted, I want money and clothes to escape.' Bond lost his nerve, tried to ride away. Dowd killed him. He took Bond's papers and clothes and bag. I couldn't stop it. I had to take Dowd home, fix him up; he bleached his hair, dressed in Bond's clothing, and got this idea of taking over the Square A, and later other big ranches.

"Dowd made me go in with him. I had to introduce him to the Amberts as Bond and he stayed at the Square A, directing the dirty work he planned there. Through me, he figured once the ranch was voted county land, I could lease it to him for a song, and he would rent it out as farm lands to settlers, make a fortune. Vorberg and Slim Shad came in, and enlisted gunmen, who were to split when we won. Dowd had to stay under cover."

Jerry Farmon arrived, and Louise Ambert with him. "Jim! I rode to the railroad station as yuh had the judge tell me, and got a copy of that telegram Ambert sent. Bond never took that train; soon as our men left, he grabbed a horse and rode toward Belfort."

Hatfield read the message. "Gents, here's the real wire John Ambert sent. He finally got a bit suspicious of Bond, really Russ Dowd. Ambert wired Bond's firm: 'Please send confidential description of Martin Bond. Name no names. Important.' He didn't want

any leak, I figger, if Bond was okay. The description that come back was the real lawyer. Dowd kilt him, and buried him along with Bill Cole in a grave Farmon and me found."

"Then—it was Dowd!" cried Jerry.

The Ranger nodded. The gray-green eyes were icy dark as he glanced through the south window, toward the wild chaparral mountains of lower Texas, and the Rio Grande.

"Callate yuh better hold court now, Judge," he drawled. "Fernando and Goodel 'll bring in their pris'ners."

He swung, limped to the hall. Men watched the tall jigger with awe, the man who, single-handed, had smashed the terrible conspiracy.

"That's Jim Hatfield — the Lone Wolf!"

Outside, crowds collected, as Vorberg's broken gunmen were led to the bar of justice.

Jim Hatfield stood on the Town Hall stoop.

"Gents," he announced, "the poll's open for votin'."

A cheer rose. "Hurrah for the Square A. They're square, boys. Hurrah for Miss Ambert!"

The answer was hearty.

Hatfield, grim determination holding him up, found the golden sorrel. Jerry Farmon touched his elbow.

"Where yuh bound, Jim?"

"After Russ Dowd."

"Figgered so. I'm goin' along."

"Stay here with yore young lady. There's plenty to see to, and yore Sal horse is worn from that run to the station. Have a posse follow me to Rio Springs, and send another to Pecos to make shore they've cleaned up there. I'll fetch Dowd back."

Farmon stared at the grim face. "I know damn well yuh will," he murmured admiringly.

He stood, watching the tall man mount the golden sorrel, and head on the trail of the worst murderer Texas had ever known.

"It'll be a case of man to man," he muttered.

CHAPTER XV

Death Duel

FAR in advance of the slower moving band of Belfort men, the Ranger hit Rio Springs.

Armed citizens were on the alert; the jail was filled with gunmen taken prisoners, the townspeople warned by Ben Goodel of the danger. The poll was open, orderly voting went on. There had been a quick, short fight, the vigilantes taking the criminals by surprise.

The town marshal told Hatfield, who identified himself, "A messenger jest rode over from Pecos. Ev'rything's okay there, too, Ranger."

Russ Dowd they had not seen; evidently he had avoided towns in his wild flight.

Hatfield rode till dark, then camped by the south trail to the Rio Grande. His wounds had stiffened but the driving determination that held him up never faltered.

He was on his way before the sun, and, with a few hours sleep, was stronger, though the fast sorrel's motion jolted his injuries painfully.

It was noon when he came to the silver ribbon of the Rio Grande, and the trail ran down to the ford. The south shore appeared utterly deserted, but he raised an arm in a signal as he crossed. Now the golden sorrel was breast deep, now only to stirrups, to the ankles, water dripping from his hide, shining in the brilliant sun.

Hatfield scanned the thorny, thick bush through which the trail wound on Mexican soil. The click of gun triggers, a sharp challenge, stopped him. Rurales, Mexican state police, stepped out on him from both sides. "Take me to Cap'n Gasca," he ordered.

A lieutenant hustled up. "Si, senor. He ees half a mile back." He saluted with respect the Ranger, seeing his star.

Gasca sprang from a collection of huts set on the trail, joyfully greeted the Lone Wolf. "You have come. We have nearly two hundred prisoners, senor, men who have prey' on us for

years."

Hatfield dismounted, took a drink of cool water Gasca had brought. "One man I want," he told Gasca. "That's Russ Dowd, yuh know him as Martin Bond."

"Bond?" stammered the rurale chief. "Why, senor, he came through here two hour ago. My men brought heem in but I—I let heem go, he was frien' of the Amberts."

Hatfield told Gasca of the fugitive's real identity, of his deeds. Gasca was stricken. "He make fool of me. Said he had come to check lan' grants in our capitol—I believe' heem!"

The Ranger's voice was low, even, as he drawled, "He's a right cunnin' sidewinder, Gasca." The gray-green eyes sought the blue mountain summits to the west, sticking into an azure sky that seemed to smoke with the brilliant sun. "Callate he'll head for them hills."

"Surely I go weeth you?"

"Follow if yuh like. I reckon I got yore permission to hunt in Mexico."

The rurale's white teeth shone as he grinned. The clasp of his hand was firm.

HOURS later, Jim Hatfield slowed the golden sorrel, for Goldy was restless. They were in a strange wilderness, of mad rocks unheaved by the gigantic volcanic forces of Nature. The masses of cruelly thorned bush seemed preternaturally silent as though holding their breath at the approaching clash of men.

The trail was reddish gravel that held no imprints, but the sorrel sniffed water. Hatfield let Goldy swing right. Yes, there was a narrow track smashed through the chaparral and a half-snapped mesquite limb that was slowly returning to position.

Near the waterhole, a glance told him that whoever had pushed through there had come out, for around the little black pool the earth was soft enough to hold tracks.

He let the sorrel take a little water, as he observed the spot where the man he was pursuing with the relentless power of Fate had lain down to drink. Above the spring, his keen vision picked out tiny strands that had obviously caught on the long thorns when the drinker had risen precipitately.

He looked closely. The hair was bleached at the ends but toward the roots was darker.

"Heard me comin'," he muttered, "and jumped up awful sudden-like."

He forced the sorrel from the water. The gray-green eyes never were still, but moved from side to side of the dangerous, bushy trail, and watched, too, the sky ahead. He knew he was up with his arch-enemy, and that any instant—It was the sky that warned him. For hundreds of yards it was clear of birds, but beyond the next rise, he saw some small birds winging over the trail, catching the insects that flitted in the warmth.

"He's in between," he whispered to the sorrel.

The big gelding sniffed, rippled his sweated hide; that meant another horse was near and Goldy sensed what was going to happen as well as his master did. Carefully the Ranger dismounted, unshipped the Winchester rifle from the saddle boot.

Absolute quiet reigned; his trained, intent ears could not catch the slightest rustle in the chaparral. Step by step he walked on, nerves a marvel of courage, never affecting the coordination of muscle and mind that meant life or death.

There was a bend, and coming around it, he saw fifty yards ahead a saddled horse, drooped in exhaustion, ridden to a frazzle. It's sides were round as a barrel from its rider's injudicious watering.

The trap was obvious to him. He was supposed to hurry to the horse and his strategic eye guessed the ambush.

He went down on one knee, threw the Winchester to his shoulder, and began pumping heavy bullets into the thick, jutting angle of bush at the turn. The gun barrel moved an inch fraction after each explosion, covering the space two or three feet above the ground where a lurking killer would crouch.

A shriek, hot curses came to him;

he glimpsed the red-rimmed eyes of the arch-murderer, the twisted furious face of Russ Dowd, alias Martin Bond, gleam of gritted teeth in a transport of rage that he was undone. A pistol slug tore a hole in the Ranger's Stetson, a second ripped a gash in his left shoulder, nicked the bone.

"Damn you, Ranger—I'll kill you," shrieked Dowd.

Never faltering, holding himself in a steel grip after the shock of that wound, Hatfield's rifle took deadly aim. The bullet from the Law's Winchester hit Dowd in the teeth, drove three on through that evil brain. Blood spurted in the bush, and Hatfield, shaking his head, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and limped toward the corpse of his foe.

CAP'N McDOWELL gravely heard Ranger Jim Hatfield's succinct report, at Austin Headquarters. He heaved a deep sigh, a sigh that was admiration mixed with envy, as though he wished he could have taken that Dowd trail himself.

"So this Dowd snake kilt Bond and dyed his hair, took the lawyer's place, and worked against the Square A. Did Farmon stay at the Square A?"

"Yes, suh. Judge Welles come in right handy, to marry Louise Ambert and Jerry."

"Good. Callate Farmon 'll take charge of the Square A and we won't have no more range trouble down there, with all them bandits rounded up. The election was right, huh?"

"Yes, suh. The voters decided the Square A was okay."

"Dowd's buzzard-bait, the Pennocks 're in prison, thanks to yuh, Jim. Yuh shore worked hard and yuh deserve anything yuh ask of the State o' Texas."

The gray-green eyes were level. In them was a light that told Jim Hatfield was not the man to demand anything of his State; he served Texas, loved her above himself.

"Texas don't owe me nuthin'. It was a pleasure to come up with a sidewinder like Dowd."

McDowell nodded. "Reckoned yuh'd feel so. And I callate I can give yuh some more of the same fun, Jim, if yuh can stand it. There's hell to pay west of the Pecos."

Later, pausing only to feed and rest the golden sorrel, to refurbish his fighting equipment, the Texas Ranger mounted and headed into the ruby red of the setting sun. Against the halo of the sky the big man was framed, the Law of the Rangers riding for Texas.

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Next Issue: LONE STAR BRAND, a Complete Book-Length Novel

Featuring JIM HATFIELD—by JACKSON COLE

Bill Shannon, Rider of the Dim Trails, Stakes His Life on a Bitter Gun Duel Between Ranger and Owlhooter!

Swiftly the Colt in Bill Shannon's hand came up, spoke once

WHITE HAT FOR AN OUTLAW

By ROBERT E. OBETS

Author of "Spiked Guns," "Sheriff Size," etc.

A THIN smile on his youthful face, "Whistling Bill" Shannon faced "Mex" Mordain, the half-breed killer. Ringed about them —gaunt, sinister figures in the red light of the cooking fire—were old "Nueces" Baines, the leader, and Crip Devlin and the ten others of the Casket Mountain gang. Farther back against the mountainside were the crumbling shacks of the abandoned Big Bend silver mine camp.

Bill Shannon's trouble with Mex Mordain, which had been brewing for months, had been brought to a head in this afternoon's silver train raid in Lost Canyon.

With half the gang, Mex Mordain had attacked from the front, while Nueces Baines and the others closed in on the rear. The silver train crew never had a chance. The few guards who grabbed for their carbines were toppled from their high seats by swift outlaw lead.

It was Bill Shannon's first raid.

Nauseated, the Colt in his hand unfired, he rode beside Monte Mordain, the younger of the two half-breed brothers. He could have cheered when Captain "Buffalo" Howell and his white-hatted Company "D" Rangers came swooping into the far end of the canyon. But he wheeled his pinto and spurred after Crip Devlin and Gap McGrew, who were leading the gang in its surprised flight.

It was then, as he flashed back down the string of wagons, that Shannon saw the chunky youngster, who looked to be a ten-year-old, standing on the seat of the front wagon.

"Tuck tail, you cowards, you!" the youngster yelled, and shook his fist at Monte Mordain, now slightly in the lead of Bill Shannon. "When Dad and his Rangers catch yuh, yuh won't even make good buzzard bait!"

Monte Mordain yanked in his bronc. Kill-lust distorting his narrow face, he raised his six-gun and took careful aim. It was the 'breed or the youngster, Shannon knew. Swiftly the Colt in his hand came up, spoke once. The slug caught Monte Mordain under the right shoulder blade and hurled him from saddle. As he hit the dust his mount bolted.

By then, the swift southwestern night was closing in. Under cover of the darkness, Bill Shannon and the others made their escape. But Monte had been left behind—and now Mex Mordain was forcing a showdown.

"You bunch-quitter!" he snarled. "I wasn't close enough this evenin' when yuh shot Monte in the back. I am now. It's yore move, Whistlin' Bill."

Bill Shannon, without taking his eyes off Mex Mordain, caught the movement of Crip Devlin and Gap McGrew as they stepped up to side the 'breed. It would be Mex first, and then those two running mates of his. Three against one. But that, Shannon vowed, would not save the half-breed.

"Was yuh that close, Mex, yuh seen Monte fix to murder that boy," he drawled. "But that wouldn't mean much to a low-down polecat like you."

"Why, yuh loose-lipped—" Mordain whipped his hands gunward.

Men scrambled back. Palms slapped gun-butts. Snake fast, Mex Mordain cleared his irons first, with Devlin and McGrew only an eye-bat behind. Shannon knew it was trail's end. He threw his lithe body sideward, and with a little moan his Colts sprang from leather.

ALMOST in Shannon's ear a .45 roared. Mex Mordain's black sombrero jerked as a bullet bored its steeple crown. His Colts out now and eared back, Shannon flicked a glance to the side. He saw old Nueces Baines crouched beside him. The old outlaw's snaggy teeth were bared in a wolfish smile, and his horny hands were filled with six-guns.

"Mex, I'm roddin' this crew," said Nueces, and his voice was flat, toneless. "Now, drop them cutters. Devlin—McGrew—yuh heard me. Let 'em go!"

Mordain glared at him. "Still actin' papa to the kid, huh?" he snarled. "Till today, yuh ain't even let him ride with us, or take any chances. I got a bellyful, Nueces! And when he plugs my brother, and yuh side him in—"

Grinning like a hungry lobo, Nueces lifted his right-hand Colt. Mordain cursed—and let his own weapons drop. Devlin and the slit-mouthed McGrew followed Mordain's example, even to the cursing.

"Nice boys," taunted Nueces. "Mex, yuh're gittin' too big for yore britches. But I'm lettin' it pass—for the time bein'. Now, lissen. As yuh know, day after tomorrow at dawn we make raid on Rosita. The only thing kin stop us is the Rangers. So here's my plan. Whistlin' Bill, yuh're ridin' down to the Ranger camp below Vieja and askin' for a job. That kid of Buffalo Howell's will prob'ly recognize yuh. Since yuh saved his life, I'm bettin' ol' Buffalo will take yuh on! With a spy in their camp—"

"Yeah, but if the boy does recognize me," objected Bill Shannon, "he'll prob'ly figger I was one of the

raiders. I'd be stickin' my neck in a noose."

"The kid might *think,* but he couldn't *know,*" Nueces told him. "And ol' Buffalo won't figger yuh an outlaw—not after yuh shot Monte. You kin tell him yuh're a wanderin' cowpoke, and jest happened up on the raid; that after yuh shot Monte yore bronc stampeded. Anyhow, it's worth the chance, ain't it, Bill? It was Rangers shot yore dad, the best friend I ever had. Me personal, I'd do anything to even the score with the hardcase sons!" He began cursing bitterly.

After he had regained his breath, he spoke more calmly.

"Do as I say, Whistlin' Bill, and our worries are over. You kin keep us informed as to all the Ranger movements. And remember, it was down on the Frio, but it was Buffalo Howell and his white-hat comp'ny that killed yore dad."

At the memory of his dad, hounded by the law, killed by the Rangers, Bill Shannon's youthful face had slowly grown bleak and old. He reached a decision.

"I'll do it!" he said. "I'll even part of the score, anyway!"

Bill Shannon left the outlaw camp that night. But after he had ridden through the gloomy pass that led to the old silver mine, he reined in. He picketed the pinto to a piñon, and using his warbag for a pillow and his saddle blanket for a bed he stretched out under the Texas stars to get the sleep he needed.

The pearly glow of the new sun was showing over the Tierra Viejas when Shannon rode up to the first of the five adobes strung along the high bank of the Rio Grande. Perhaps fifty yards to his right he saw a bunch of horses in a pole corral, and in the open space between the corral and the buildings he saw a bald, bearded fellow stirring around a small fire. The pleasant odor of boiling coffee came to his nostrils, reminding him that he was hungry. But his stomach would have to wait. Whistling softly, he swung down.

BEFORE he could sing out a greeting, a big, raw-boned fellow, with alert blue eyes set in a sun-wrinkled, droop-mustached face, came to the doorway. Stuffing in his shirt tail, he gazed inquiringly down at Shannon. This grizzled oldster, the young rider knew from description, was Captain Buffalo Howell. Shannon's nerves were strumming. Would it be a job—or a hang noose?

"I'm lookin' for a Ranger job," Bill Shannon said bluntly. "Was headed here yestiddy when I bumped into a silver train raid. Figgered yuh'd be out after the outlaws most of the night, so I waited till this mornin' to see yuh. I kin ride and I kin shoot."

A fleeting smile touched the old Ranger's face. "There's plenty Texicans kin do that—them Casket Mountain loboes, for example. Yuh got any other recommendations, young feller? Where yuh from? Where'd yuh work last?"

Suddenly Shannon remembered old "Barbecue" Bates—his beef herd had been easy pickings for Nueces and the others, as long as it lasted.

"The name is Bill, Whistlin' Bill Shannon," he said. "I rode for the Bar B Q, down on the Nueces, till rustlers broke old Bates and he had to turn us boys off."

"I know Ike Bates. Fact, it was my boys that finally run the rustlers outa the Nueces bottoms," said the Ranger captain. Then he frowned. "How come I didn't see yuh yestiddy, if yuh happened onto the raid?"

"Why, I reckon," Shannon answered smoothly, "it was because my bronc got boogered and stompeded with me jest as yore boys whooped into the canyon. Yuh see, I cracked down on a skunk that was fixin' to shoot a youngster, and my fool pinto—"

"By Joe, this is luck!" The oldster's face lighted up. "Feller, that kid yuh saved was my Jigger boy. Been out on a visit with me, and was goin' back to his mother in Santone. After the raid he come on back here—been talkin' about yuh ever since! Bill, I'm shore in yore debt!"

"It's—it wasn't nothin'," Shannon said uncomfortably. "I'm glad the boy wasn't hurt, but any man woulda done the—"

At that moment young Jigger popped into view beside Buffalo Howell. At sight of Bill Shannon, his eyes widened and his freckled face beamed.

"Gee, I'm glad to see yuh agin, pardner!" he exclaimed delightedly. "Come to join the Rangers? I bet yuh'd make a good one!"

Buffalo Howell grinned. "I 'spect yore judgment is worth listenin' to, Jigger. It ain't regular, takin' on a man I know so little about. But I'm givin' Whistlin' Bill a trial."

"Trial, nothin'!" snorted Jigger. "Bill's goin' to make the best darned Ranger in the State, I betcha that!"

So it was that Whistling Bill Shannon, outlaw, joined up with Company "D", Border outfit of the Texas Rangers. Right after breakfast Buffalo Howell led him to the headquarters adobe, and there the new recruit swore his oath of allegiance to the State and became a full-fledged Ranger.

"It seems too easy," said Shannon, grinning. "Maybe, when I git me one of them four-gallon white hats, I'll feel more like I belong."

"It ain't easy, Whistlin' Bill," the Ranger captain told him. "Yuh furnish yore own mount and gear, yore saddle gun, pistols, bowie knife and clothes; yuh ride and yuh fight, risk yore neck day in and day out—and all for yore chuck and a dollar and a quarter a day. But there's somethin' about it that gits in yore blood. No real Ranger minds the hardships and the danger. He fights for the love of it, and for the Lone Star. Without the Rangers, there couldn't been any Lone Star. The Rangers *are* Texas. Yuh'll find that out, if yuh stick, Whistlin' Bill."

HOWELL'S voice grew serious.

"As for those white hats, most Rangers wear 'em. But they're sort of a tradition with my company. My boys wear the biggest and the whitest hats in Texas. 'The Black Devils in White Hats'—that's what they call themselves. They won't let a recruit wear one till he proves himself, neither. But in this outfit a new man usually gits that chance right pronto!"

Bill Shannon stood there and watched Buffalo Howell's face glow with pride as he talked on about the service he loved. Shannon tried to appear interested, but inwardly he sneered. It was the law these Rangers represented that had made his father a rider of the owlhoot trails; it was Captain Buffalo Howell and his White Hats that had killed his father. All Shannon wanted now was the chance to hit back.

That chance came sooner than he expected. He spent the day on a patrol upriver with Sergeant Rhone and four others. They had just returned to camp when Captain Howell called all hands to the headquarters adobe. Shannon could tell that the old Ranger captain, standing there surveying his company from the doorway, was highly excited.

"Men, it looks like our chore here is about done," he said. "I jest got back from Vieja, and a talk with that rat Monte Mordain we put in jail. He ain't, but he thinks he's dyin' from the wound Whistlin' Bill give him. When I reminded him how the others run off and left him to be captured, mebbe to hang, he talked and talked plenty!

"Fellers, the Casket Mountain bunch is raidin' Rosita at dawn. Be set to ride two hours afore day. We'll hide our horses and lay up on the flat roofs of the 'dobies along both sides the street. When them buzzards git in our trap, we'll pour it to 'em! That's all, boys—git some grub under yore belts and hit the hay."

As Bill Shannon turned away he felt a hand on his arm, and looking down he saw Jigger.

"I betcha yuh earn that white hat tomorrer, Bill pardner," said the youngster. "Doggone it, I wisht Buffalo'd let me go!"

Shannon was thinking about Nueces Baines, remembering how the oldster

had stood by him and his father, Rance Shannon. A thirty a month cowpoke then, old Nueces had stuck to the end in Rance Shannon's bitter fight against the land-grabbing Gill Faris. In the final one-sided showdown scrap, two Faris gunnies had been killed. The law had called it murder, and Rance Shannon and Nueces, taking twelve-year-old Bill with them, had started on the outlaw trail.

A year ago Buffalo Howell and his White Hats had jumped the gang with a bunch of rustled beef, and Rance Shannon had been killed. Now, those same Rangers had set a death trap for Nueces Baines.

Young Shannon's lips twisted. "So that's the way white hats is earned, eh, Jigger?" he said bitterly, and strode away.

It was nearly midnight when Bill Shannon slipped out of the adobe he shared with six other Rangers, and eased down to the corral. Quietly he caught up his pinto, saddled, and rode at a fast lope for the gloomy pass that led to the old silver mine.

Two hours later, after a brief talk with Nueces, he was riding back toward the Ranger camp. Knowing the Rangers would soon be starting to Rosita and he would be missed, he was pushing the pinto hard. But he was whistling softly. Old Nueces knew now about Monte Mordain's loose tongue, and about the Ranger trap.

BILL SHANNON spurred out of the pass—and pulled up short. There at the pass mouth, on his little black pony, was Jigger!

"What the — what're yuh doin' here?" Shannon growled.

"I follered yuh," said Jigger. "I reckon I et too many *frijoles*, anyhow I shore had the bellyache. I got up to git me some sody like Buffalo takes, and I seen yuh ride off. I slipped out and saddled ol' Blacky and tagged along behind. I seen yuh ride in there, and figgered I better wait here. But I'd have been in there on the run If there'd been any shootin'! What sorta deal is this anyhow, pardner?"

"Yuh'll have to promise to keep it under yore hat," said Bill Shannon, thinking swiftly. He set spurs to the pinto. "Yuh see," he went on, "I got word three stage robbers is holdin' up in the canyon that pass leads to. I aim to capture the sons by myself. Their camp's in there, all right, but they wasn't home. Must be on a job. I'll catch 'em yet, though, if yuh'll keep quiet, and mebbe I'll win me that white hat!"

"Gee, Bill, it takes a real man to tackle three killers, lone-handed!" exclaimed Jigger. Then, hanging his head, he blurted out: "Dang it, I gotta tell yuh! Bill, when I seen yuh go in there, jest for a minute I thought mebbe yuh aimed to tip somebody off about the trap Dad's got set for tomorrer. Dang it, yestiddy when yuh saved my bacon, it—it looked like, jest at first, yuh was with them outlaws yoreself. Gee, I'm glad I never mentioned it!"

The youngster chuckled with pride. "Won't Buffalo be surprised when yuh come luggin' in them three skunks! That's what I'm goin' to be purty soon—a Ranger, like Dad and you. Ain't Rangerin' swell, Bill?"

Bill Shannon watched a coyote slink behind a creosote bush.

"Yeah," he said gruffly. "It's—swell."

He was relieved when they reached camp and Jigger left him, to stake Blacky on the bunch-grass flat near the headquarters adobe. The camp seemed asleep. Shannon unsaddled, turned his pinto back into the corral, and slipped back to his blankets. Moody and restless, he lay there until Captain Howell yelled reveille.

"Roll out, yuh sons!"

They ate a cold, hasty breakfast, threw on saddles and rode north. An hour later, in the gray of the coming dawn, they lay shivering on the damp, flat roofs of the adobes that lined Rosita's one street. It was a deadly trap — twenty Rangers, strengthened by the dozen-odd white inhabitants of the little settlement. But the intended quarry never appeared. The

sun was a full hour high before Captain Howell gave up hope.

"That yeller-livered Mordain was too scared to lie," he growled. "Somebody musta tipped the gang off!"

He stood up on the roof and gazed narrowly at Bill Shannon, who happened to be next to him. His next move was so sudden that Shannon could only blink—blink at the muzzle of a Colt that leaped into Captain Howell's hand.

"Ranger Shannon, hand over yore guns."

Shrugging, the new recruit obeyed. But he still felt pretty good. Jigger wouldn't give him away, so they couldn't prove anything. And he wasn't ashamed of what he had done. He had saved old Nueces.

CAPTAIN HOWELL was grim.

"I hope I'm wrong, Whistlin' Bill," he said. "But I caught Jigger slippin' in about two this morning, and all he would say was he'd been for a ride. He's taken quite a fancy to yuh, though, and I'm wonderin' now if mebbe Jigger didn't happen to see yuh ride off and decide to foller. Besides, I noticed yore pinto looked mighty jaded. Well—we'll see, we git back to camp. Jigger'll come clean when I tell him what I think—that mebbe yuh're a spy."

But when they reached the Ranger camp, Jigger couldn't be found. His pony was grazing peacefully on the flat, but Jigger himself had disappeared.

"Prob'ly down on the Rio, fishin'," said Captain Howell; but there was a worried frown on his face.

He locked Bill Shannon in the extra room of the headquarters adobe, a room that had been made into a makeshift jail, and turned and started out. Watching him through the small square hole in the heavy door, Shannon saw him suddenly pick up a brown piece of paper from the table. The paper had been weighted down with a box of cartridges. It looked like a piece of a paper sack.

As Captain Howell gazed at the paper, his rugged face slowly drained of color, then his lips tightened. He strode over and thrust the paper through the hole at Bill Shannon.

"Yuh miserable rat," he grated. "I ought to gut-shoot yuh!"

Shannon glanced at the smudged pencil-printed words on the note. His nerves beginning to crawl, he read:

WE HAVE YOUR KID BRING MY BROTHER TO THE OLD RUSTLER CABIN AT PARAL PASS TONITE AT SEVEN COME ALONE IF ANYTHING HAPPENS TO MONTE IT WILL BE TO BAD YOUR KID WILL COME BACK IN PEACES THANK BILL SHANNON FOR ME FOR TIPPING US OFF SO WE COULD SAVE OUR NEKS AND GRAB THE KID

MEX MORDAIN

Jumbled thoughts flashed through Bill Shannon's mind. . . . Little Jigger following him last night, wanting to side him in a gunplay. "That's what I'm goin' to be purty soon—a Ranger, like Dad and you." They'd keep him in that concrete room at the mine, the one that had been used as a combination jail and storeroom for the silver. And Mex wasn't bluffing. He was insanely cruel. That time Mex caught the squirming lizard, dipped it in kerosene and set it afire.

"Yuh'll have to turn Monte loose," Shannon groaned. "Mex is a devil! He'll—"

"I'll never let that murderer go!" The Ranger captain was heading for the door. He almost collided with a hatless fellow who burst inside, a fellow with a sheriff's badge on his vest.

"Cap'n!" the sheriff yelped. "They jest lynched Monte Mordain! It was friends of that teamster, Bergen. I was out of town—"

"Good riddance," said Howell grimly. He stuck his head out the door. "Sergeant Rhone! Git the boys ready to ride!"

"What yuh intend to do?" Bill Shannon called anxiously. "When Mex hears—"

THE Ranger captain strode toward the prisoner. "Listen," he said gravely. "Yuh're leadin' me and the boys to the gang's hideout. Think it over, Shannon. My men think a heap of Jigger. If I tell 'em what yuh've done, they'll—"

"It won't work," said Shannon quietly. "There ain't but one way into the hangout, and they'll have a guard at the pass. He'll give warnin'—and Mex will kill Jigger. There's jest one thing might work. Yuh let me go, and I'll ride in there. I know old Nueces Baines had no part in this. Mebbe he'll help me. Mebbe, some way, I kin git the kid out. If not, I kin anyhow settle with the guard at the pass. Then I'll send up three puffs of smoke, a Indian signal, and you and the boys come a-whoopin'. Mebbe, thataway, yuh kin take 'em by surprise."

"It sounds good," admitted Howell. "If it's like yuh say, the other way they'd prob'ly kill Jigger. But I cain't trust—"

"Yuh've got to!" Bill Shannon cried. "There ain't no other way out."

For five minutes, then, he talked swiftly, earnestly. He told Captain Howell about his father and old Nueces, why they had turned outlaw, everything—even about his warning Nueces of the trap. When he had finished, the old Ranger's face wore a somewhat softer look.

"I believe I savvy, Whistlin' Bill, how under them conditions a man might turn outlaw," he said. "So I'm takin' a chance on yuh. Not that I condone any man's takin' up the outlaw trails," he added. "But if yuh doublecross me—" He gripped his Colt butt in unmistakable meaning.

It was high noon when Whistling Bill Shannon approached the forbidding mouth of the pass. Behind him, awaiting his smoke signal, Captain Howell and his white hats were hidden in a little canyon. Ahead of him were Mex Mordain and the Casket Mountain gang—and maybe death. For of the whole crew, only Nueces Baines was his friend.

As Shannon entered the pass, on a ledge high overhead he saw the guard. Expecting trouble, he was understandably surprised when the guard waved him on in. He rode on through the pass, and as he neared the camp his gaze was intent on the concrete storeroom, with its iron-barred door and windows, perched at the end of the row of buildings and overlooking the pass. But he didn't see Jigger until he came opposite the front of the storeroom. Then he saw him.

The youngster was at the door, with his snubbed nose poked through the bars. Bill Shannon winked and smiled faintly. But the youngster hung his head. As Shannon rode on past, the youngster hissed a single word—"Spy!"

Shannon stopped at the last shack, the one Nueces used. He dismounted and strode to the open door. He saw Nueces stretched out on a dirty bunk.

As he stepped through the doorway, old Nueces got to his feet, reaching for his guns. Then he smiled broadly.

"Whistlin' Bill!" he exclaimed.

"I've come after the kid," said Shannon simply. "It was a skunk trick, Nueces, grabbin' that—"

"I know it." Swiftly Nueces closed the door. "It was Mex," he said turning. "He took Devlin and McGrew. Told me they was goin' after Monte. Instead, they got the boy. But, if they don't hurt him—"

"Yuh know Mex better than that," said Shannon grimly. "Now listen."

Hurriedly he told Nueces about the kidnap note, about the smoke signal and the waiting Rangers.

"But if I kin," he finished, "I aim to git Jigger outa here without the Rangers."

NERVOUSLY, Nueces opened the door and looked out. He closed it again quickly.

"Thought I heard something. I'm gettin' jumpy. Any time now Mex and his pals is goin' to jump me." He hunkered down so that he could watch the door. "I'll help yuh, Bill," he promised. "But we'll never git the kid out. Better we slip up on the

guard, then signal—"

Too late, Bill Shannon caught the movement at the window behind Nueces. There was a stab of flame, the roar of a .45—and Nueces pitched onto his face. Shannon was whipping up his right-hand Colt when the door burst open. Mex Mordain, Crip Devlin, McGrew and several others, six-guns bristling in their hands, crowded in.

"I'll take 'em, Whistlin' Bill," Mordain purred, and jabbing his .45 into Shannon's middle, took possession of the twin Colts. He glanced down at Nueces, huddled and still there on the floor.

"Looks like the boys has got a new leader," he crowed. "A real one this time, instead of an old woman that—"

"A back-shootin' coyote, yuh mean!" Shannon barked savagely, and balled his hands.

His black eyes glittering, Mordain eared back his .45. Then a sly smile slid over his face, and he eased the hammer back down.

"I knowed yuh'd come when yuh heard about the boy," he sneered. "Me an' the boys was waitin', an' we slipped up here jest in time to hear plenty. Thanks for tellin' us about that smoke signal and them Rangers that's waitin'! I believe now, Whistlin' Bill, I won't kill yuh—jest yet. I'll let yuh watch them Rangers ride into my little trap, yuh love 'em so much!"

With his .45, Mordain prodded Shannon to the storeroom. He took a huge rusty key from his pocket and turned the ponderous lock. As he shoved Shannon inside with the wide-eyed Jigger, he could not suppress a vicious snarl.

"I always did hate yore guts—yore dad's, too! He was always orderin' me around. That's why I killed him. No, it wasn't Rangers. That time they jumped us, I shot yore dad. But I ain't goin' to shoot *you!* The kid, neither. I heard yuh tell Nueces that Monte was hung, an' yuh're goin' to pay for it! Yuh won't die fast an' easy—neither one of yuh! Yuh'll die the hard way—and beg for death!"

Mordain turned away, snapped out orders. One man rode to call in the pass guard. Others hastily built a brush fire in the open space in front of the storeroom. Then they got a blanket and tossed some green leaves on the fire. Two men held the blanket over the smoldering leaves until the pocket thus formed filled with smoke; then the blanket was swept aside. A ball of white smoke, visible for miles in the clear air, rolled skyward. They did this twice more.

Mex Mordain, grinning evilly, came and peered through the bars at his two prisoners.

"Those Rangers see that signal," he gloated, "they'll come a-foggin' in to catch us by surprise. But it'll be them that'll git the surprise! Me and the boys will be hid on each side the pass. From the winder there you kin watch us mow 'em down. Then it'll be yore turn! Lucky I found the key in the old mine office. Jest try gettin' out!"

IN a few minutes the outlaws rode toward the pass. Bill Shannon's heart sank. This storeroom built to hold valuable silver, was stronger than most jails. There wasn't a chance to get out, even if he had a hammer and chisel. And in fifteen minutes or so, Captain Howell and his White Hats would come riding to their death! Desperately, Shannon tried the door and both windows.

"Not a chance!" he groaned.

Jigger, with a queer look on his pale face, was watching him.

"For a outlaw, yuh shore act funny," he said. "Why'd yuh come here, anyhow?"

Briefly, Bill Shannon told him some of the things he already had told Captain Howell.

"So, yuh see," he ended, "even if I am a outlaw, I wanted to git yuh outa here. I shore made a mess of it. They jumped me so sudden I never even had time to put up a scrap. And yore dad—if any of 'em git outa that death trap, they'll think I set it!"

"Shucks pardner, we'll git out—" somehow. An' I'm gonna tell Dad yuh're a real—" Jigger's voice broke. "Dang it," he sobbed, "I wouldn't

mind, if we could git out and fight!"

Shannon put an arm around the youngster's shoulders. Through the window he saw the outlaws, on foot now, rifles gleaming, taking places high on each side of the pass.

"If I jest had a gun to blast that lock with!" he groaned, glancing down at his filled cartridge belts. "All that good black powder, and no gun!"

Despite himself, he gazed back out the window. Those White Hats would show up any time now. They wouldn't have a chance, but they'd go down with Colts smoking. Those men he had hated, had sneered at—why, he'd give his right arm to be with them now! To die fighting with the Black Devils in White Hats. Then, behind their rocks, the outlaws suddenly went tense. They had sighted the Rangers! A few more minutes now—

In his misery Bill Shannon slapped his empty holsters. He felt the weight of those cartridge-filled belts.

"Holy Helena! Why didn't I think of it!"

Punching .45's from his belt loops, he ran to the door.

"Watch the winder, Jigger!" he rapped.

Pulling from his pocket the brown paper note Mex Mordain had written to Captain Howell, he spread it on the floor. With his teeth he began twisting the lead from a fat .45 cartridge. In a couple of minutes that seemed hours, twisting and pouring he had piled enough black powder on the paper to fill a tobacco sack. Then, creasing one edge of the paper into a V, he lifted it and carefully sifted the powder into the big keyhole. The lock wouldn't hold quite all of it. He threw away the left-over portion, and reaching through the bars, plugged up the outer side of the keyhole with part of the brown paper.

"Hey!" yelled Jigger. "Dad and them's comin'! Then skunks is gittin' their rifles—"

"In that corner, Jigger!" Shannon

Hola, Folks! Meet "Fog Horn" Clancy!

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—who will
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WEST and RANGE RIDERS

EACH 15c AT ALL STANDS

pulled a match from his pocket. "Flat on yore belly! That's it!

Bill Shannon was aware of the terrific exploding force of imprisoned black powder, but he had no time to be cautious. Pressed flat against the wall, he struck the match and reached out and poked the blazing head of it into the keyhole.

THE lock exploded with the violence of a bomb. Too late, Shannon jerked back his arm. It felt as if it had been peppered with buckshot. But, fumbling for the door, he wasn't worrying about his arm. His eyes were what bothered him. He couldn't hold them open, couldn't see! Well, no time to worry about that, either! His left hand found the door, shoved. It came open! Bill Shannon pursed his lips, gave a shrill whistle. In a few moments he heard his trained pinto clattering up. Then he remembered Jigger.

"Jig boy, yuh all right?" he asked worriedly.

"Shore! I'm right here at yuh. Caint yuh see—"

"Then, help me onto my hoss. I—hurt my leg a bit."

He reached out, touching Jigger, clasped the boy's arm.

"Sorta help me along, will yuh?" He kept his face turned away. It wouldn't do to let Jigger know he couldn't see. He'd have a hard enough time making him stay here, as it was. Holding onto Jigger's arm, he got to his horse. In the saddle he growled an order.

"Don't try follerin' me, hear? Sneak over in them bushes and hide. Kin yuh see the boys yet?"

"Their white hats is jest bobbin' into the pass," Jigger told him. "They—Hey, why cain't *you* see 'em? Why—Jeepers! Yuh're blind! Bill, let me go! I kin ride well as—"

But Bill Shannon was spurring away. "I'll be alright, Jigger pard," he called back. "Take to them bushes!"

He gave the pinto its head. The animal would follow the trail on into the pass. Maybe the White Hats would see him in time and turn back. Maybe they wouldn't. But there was one way, even in his darkness, that he could be sure they were warned. He could keep riding until those outlaws up there sighted him, started shooting. They were about half way up the pass. By riding hard, he could reach that point ahead of the Rangers.

If the outlaws let him ride through, he could warn the men; if they didn't their rifle shots would give the Rangers the warning.

Bill Shannon roweled the pinto hard. As he rode along in that awful gloom the thought came to him that if he had a white hat, the boys could see him easier. And at the thought, he smiled faintly. There would never be any white hat for him.

Whistling Bill Shannon, outlaw, was on his last ride.

He knew it even more certainly when he reached the middle of the pass. For, above him, cutting through the pound of the pinto's hoofs, he heard Mex Mordain's snarl.

"How the devil— Shoot the son down! It's Whistlin' Bill!"

Shannon knew then how a man feels standing blindfolded against a white wall. He couldn't see. He couldn't fight back. He could just listen to the death song of those outlaw rifles—and wait.

Rifles began whining spitefully. Lead snapped past him, tugged at his clothes. But he stood up in the stirrups and yelled at the very top of his voice.

"Git back, fellers, it's a trap! *Git back!*" He whirled his old gray sombrero over his head then, a prayer on his lips. "Lord, how I'd love to see them white Stetsons a-shinin' in the sun once more!"

Something bit into his right shoulder, sent him reeling in the saddle. Before he could recover from the shock, a giant hand seemed to slap the side of his head. He felt as if he were floating. His whole body slammed against something hard, unyielding, and he realized dimly that he had hit the ground. Faintly, as he slipped into unconsciousness, he heard an angry shout.

"They got him! Climb up after the skunks, men! We'll learn 'em to down a Ranger!" And the voice sounded a lot like Buffalo Howell's.

Bill Shannon's eyes opened on a white hat. It was brand new, and it seemed to shine; it would have held four gallons. He gazed at it wonderingly for several minutes before memory came back to him, and he realized that he was looking at something, that he could see again. He started to smile, and then a sad thought sobered him.

"I reckon Buffalo and the boys is done for," he groaned weakly. "They're gone, and I'm alive. I never even got to help 'em fight—"

"Yuh still must be muddled up, Whistlin' Bill," a voice growled. "It was the Casket Mountain bunch got done in—thanks to you!"

Bill Shannon's gaze lifted from the chair and the white hat. Standing there, with grins on their faces, were Buffalo Howell and Jigger!

"Jigger — thank goodness," said Shannon weakly, and closed his eyes. In a moment, though, they opened again. "The others, the White Hats? Are they all—dead?"

"Hell no! Not the way they was moppin' up breakfast a while ago!" Buffalo Howell grinned hugely. "Yuh see, yuh've been outa yore head all night, ever since we brought yuh back to camp. But the doc says it's jest bullet shock and loss of blood. Feller, my boys went hog wild when them killers downed yuh, and yuh ridin' to warn us! We mopped up the whole outfit—got 'em dead or in jail.

"It was Jigger told us why, after we first seen yuh and turned back, that yuh jest kept on a-ridin'. Yuh see, we never knew yuh was blind. Whistlin' Bill, it takes a real man to do what yuh done. Jigger told us the whole story. And yore eyes is all right. Doc says they was filled with rust and dust from that old lock, and sorta scorched around the edges. Yuh shoulda heard the boys yell when he told 'em yuh was goin' to be all right!"

"I'm awful glad it all turned out so good," said Bill Shannon sadly. "I reckon I'll be ridin' on now. Yuh won't want a outlaw hangin' around—"

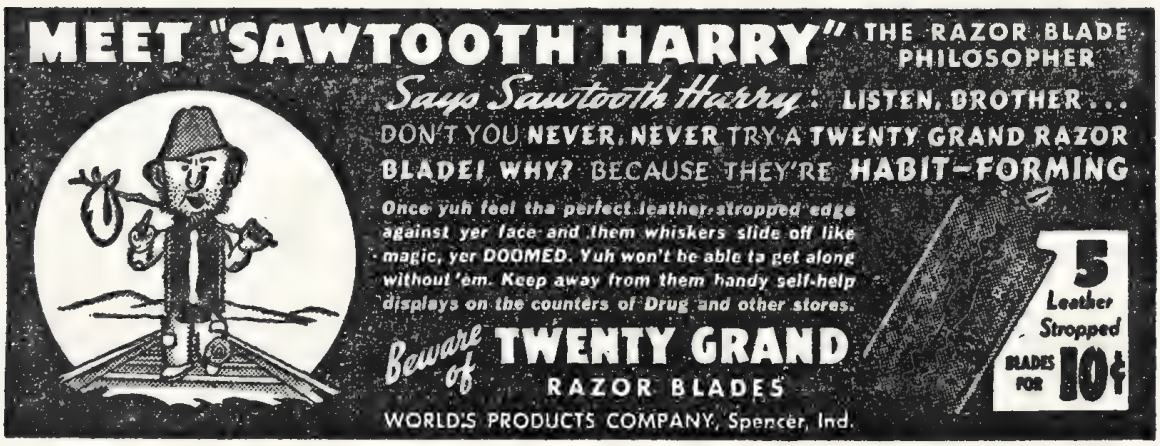
"Outlaw!" snorted Captain Howell. "If yuh think a scrapper like you is goin' to quit my company, yuh got another think comin'!"

"Gee!" said Bill Shannon softly, and sudden moisture was apparent in his eyes.

But after a time, still eying the white hat, he ventured a hope deep within him.

"I see yuh done bought a new lid. Uh—wonder could I borrow yore old one, till I kin git to town. That is, if the boys'll let me—"

"Lissen, feller, Jigger rode to Vieja afore sunup, got a store man outa bed, jest to buy that hat!" Buffalo Howell's leathery face was strangely soft. "Yuh see, the boys took up a little collection. Yuh ain't jest attached to Company 'D', now. Yuh're one of them Black Devils in White Hats!"


MEET "SAWTOOTH HARRY"
THE RAZOR BLADE PHILOSOPHER
Says Sawtooth Harry: LISTEN, BROTHER...
DON'T YOU NEVER, NEVER TRY A TWENTY GRAND RAZOR BLADE! WHY? BECAUSE THEY'RE HABIT-FORMING
Once yuh feel the perfect leather-stropped edge against yer face and them whiskers slide off like magic, yer DOOMED. Yuh won't be able ta get along without 'em. Keep away from them handy self-help displays on the counters of Drug and other stores.
Beware of TWENTY GRAND RAZOR BLADES
WORLD'S PRODUCTS COMPANY, Spencer, Ind.
5 Leather Stropped BLADES FOR 10¢

Famous TEXAS RANGERS

CAPTAIN JOHN J. TUMLINSON

By Jack Turner

EARLY IN JANUARY 1836, CAPTAIN JOHN J. TUMLINSON ESTABLISHED HIS COMMAND OF SIXTY RANGERS A FEW MILES NORTHWEST OF THE PRESENT CITY OF AUSTIN. ONE DAY A PARTY OF TRAVELERS, MR. AND MRS. HIBBONS, THEIR TWO CHILDREN AND MRS. HIBBONS' BROTHER APPROACHED THE RANGER CAMP

LOOK, CAPTAIN, MORE SETTLERS!

I'LL HAVE TO PERSUADE THEM NOT TO GO FARTHER. THIS IS INDIAN COUNTRY!

HOWEVER, RANGER TUMLINSON WAS UNABLE TO PERSUADE THE SETTLERS TO GIVE UP THEIR TREK. ABOUT TWENTY MILES FARTHER ON THE TRAIL, THEY WERE ATTACKED BY COMANCHES

THE INDIANS KILLED MRS. HIBBONS' HUSBAND AND BROTHER, AND TOOK HERSELF AND HER TWO SMALL CHILDREN CAPTIVE. THE SMALLER CHILD CRIED INCESSANTLY. ONE COMANCHE PICKED UP THE CHILD AND BASHED OUT HIS BRAINS AGAINST A TREE.

SQUAWLING BABY NOT MAKE GOOD COMANCHE!

MEANWHILE, CAPTAIN TUMLINSON, BECAME APPREHENSIVE, AND DECIDED TO FOLLOW THE HIBBONS' TRAIL

I'D LIKE ABOUT FIFTEEN VOLUNTEERS TO ACCOMPANY ME. I'M GETTING WORRIED ABOUT THOSE SETTLERS WHO PASSED US YESTERDAY!

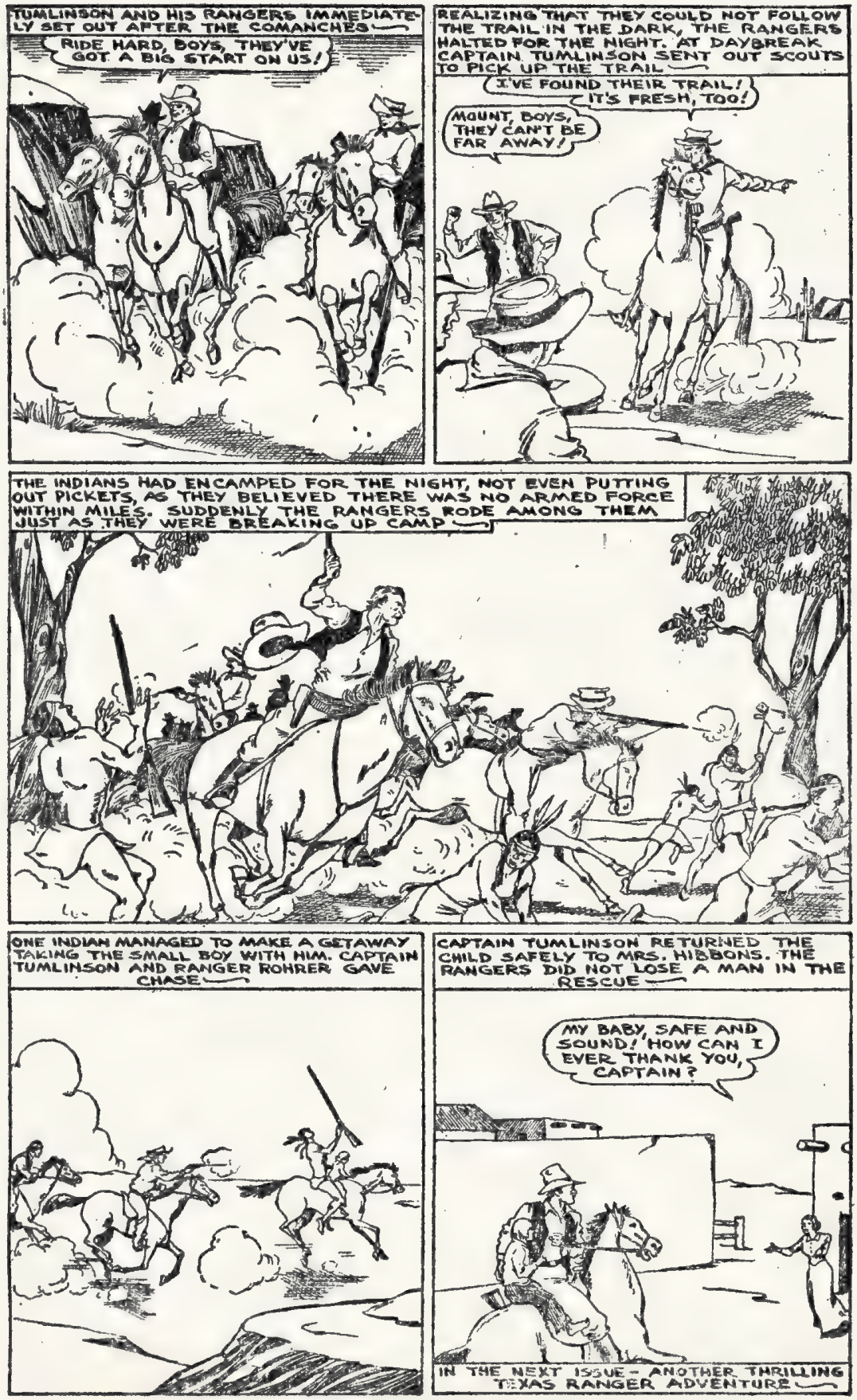
TAKE ME!

I'LL GO!

THAT NIGHT, LEAVING HER REMAINING SON A CAPTIVE, MRS. HIBBONS CREPT OUT OF THE INDIAN CAMP. FOR MILES SHE STRUGGLED DOWN A CREEK, TO HIDE HER FOOTPRINTS

BY MERE CHANCE, LATE THE NEXT AFTERNOON, SHE STUMBLED UP TO TUMLINSON AND HIS FIFTEEN RANGERS

OH, CAPTAIN. THE COMANCHES ATTACKED US! ONLY ONE OF MY CHILDREN IS ALIVE! PLEASE SAVE HIM!


TUMLINSON AND HIS RANGERS IMMEDIATELY SET OUT AFTER THE COMANCHES
RIDE HARD, BOYS, THEY'VE GOT A BIG START ON US!
REALIZING THAT THEY COULD NOT FOLLOW THE TRAIL IN THE DARK, THE RANGERS HALTED FOR THE NIGHT. AT DAYBREAK CAPTAIN TUMLINSON SENT OUT SCOUTS TO PICK UP THE TRAIL
I'VE FOUND THEIR TRAIL! IT'S FRESH, TOO!
MOUNT, BOYS, THEY CAN'T BE FAR AWAY!
THE INDIANS HAD ENCAMPED FOR THE NIGHT, NOT EVEN PUTTING OUT PICKETS, AS THEY BELIEVED THERE WAS NO ARMED FORCE WITHIN MILES. SUDDENLY THE RANGERS RODE AMONG THEM JUST AS THEY WERE BREAKING UP CAMP
ONE INDIAN MANAGED TO MAKE A GETAWAY TAKING THE SMALL BOY WITH HIM. CAPTAIN TUMLINSON AND RANGER ROHRER GAVE CHASE
CAPTAIN TUMLINSON RETURNED THE CHILD SAFELY TO MRS. HIBBONS. THE RANGERS DID NOT LOSE A MAN IN THE RESCUE
MY BABY, SAFE AND SOUND! HOW CAN I EVER THANK YOU, CAPTAIN?
IN THE NEXT ISSUE – ANOTHER THRILLING TEXAS RANGER ADVENTURE

GUN-GANG PLOT

The bottle burst as if from an internal explosion

Treacherous and Deadly, This Bandit Trio Plan to Dry-Gulch a Lead-Slinging Ranger!

By ANSON HARD

Author of "Name of A Horse Thief," "Lead Epidemic," etc.

FROM his position at the brass footrail the swamper heard the sudden swish of the batwing doors, the excited *clop-clop* of Soapy's boots, and his bursting splutter of words as he walked to the two men at the gaming table.

"A stranger jest rode into town!"

There came the sound of a chair scraping as big Bill Garst straightened. The swamper, on all fours polishing the long rail, heard Pug Negley, the bartender, swing around and stand frozen in attention.

"Who is it?" Garst's voice was reduced to a whispered rumble.

"Didn't I say it was a stranger? It must be that Jim Heywood. And he looks mighty hard, too. I tell yuh the jig's up if they've sent in that ranger—"

Garst's fist slapped down on the table. "Hold yore britches, yuh hammerhead! Who's afraid of one ranger? He's only a man. Besides, yuh don't know this feller is one, anyway."

The swamper felt the tremor of suppressed excitement pass to his own frame. He raised himself slightly, a

disreputable figure in his stained and tattered clothes, and peered cautiously at the three men about the table. His muscles twitched slightly under his grizzled stubble of beard, and his hand wavered with the wiping rag. Behind him he noted the door at the end of the bar—a possible exit in case of trouble.

His red-rimmed eyes rested in painstaking scrutiny on the figure of Garst. Big Bill was solidly built and not uncomely of figure, but with the swaggering insolence of a bully stamped on him. Even the heavy Colt at his thigh seemed ugly, menacing. Soapy Willis, the messenger, was the opposite. Cunning and artifice showed in his vulpine face, and a trace of cruelty in the thin lips. Cal Hodder, the third man of the trio, was a dead-panned individual with inscrutable eyes.

"Do we drift, Chief?" questioned Soapy.

Garst looked at his henchman with contempt. "Scared of one man ridin' into town? Hell, we find out who this stranger is first. Things is too purty to vamose. We've pulled some good jobs, but the big play's comin' up. That mine payroll's gettin' through to Calibar too frequent."

"But they been two killin's—that stage driver and—"

"Shut up!"

There was a brisk clump of heels on the porch. Soapy's quick signal with his lips made no sound. The swinging doors parted before a thrusting hand, and a stranger entered the saloon. A silence that was almost a b y s m a l dropped over the barroom.

The newcomer walked straight toward the bar. He apparently gave no heed to the trio at the table, but there was a keen directness about his gaze that registered all things with a single glance. He was neatly dressed, but not markedly different from the ordinary rider. A thin filter of dust lay upon his garments, and his belt of tooled leather supported a gun swung well forward.

The swamper stared at him a moment and went back to his wiping, a gleam of admiration lighting his reddened eyes; then he swung himself around a little that he might be better pointed toward that rear door.

The white-aproned Negley stood expectant. "What'll yuh have?"

"Give me a cigar."

BILL GARST got to his feet. The inoffensive swamper heard him coming and attempted to draw in his legs—too late. Garst, his eyes entirely on the stranger, stumbled over the outstretched legs and pitched forward, sprawling, against the bar.

The big man straightened and whirled, rage clouding his heavy features. A low, mirthful chuckle came from the man with the cigar. That laugh touched the final spring of Big Bill's evil temper. A flood of profanity poured at the unfortunate swamper as Bill drew back his boot.

The whiskered man cowered, tried to draw away, but the rise of the bar blocked him. He threw up an arm that was no defense against the kick of Garst. The boot-toe thudded sickeningly into his side.

The swamper saw the stranger let the cigar fall from his mouth, saw his lips go hard and straight until white chalked the corners. A corded arm snapped out and swung Garst around.

"Hold on, fella. Yuh don't have to kick a man like that. He's merely doing his work. It was yore own awkwardness in stumbling over him. If yuh've got to vent yore vile temper, pick a man standing up, a man who can fight back."

Big Bill outweighed this stranger by thirty pounds. He towered above him by half a head. The muscles bulged in his stout biceps as ungovernable temper shoved a red wave up his throat.

"Who are you to order me? I think the ole fool tripped me a-purpose. I'll learn him to keep his feet where they belong. An' as fur you, yuh keep yore snoot in yore own business."

The newcomer was not in the least abashed. His cool voice rang clearly. "It's any man's business to keep a poor fellow like that from being abused. Just lay off him or I'll take a hand."

"Yuh'll what?"

The swamper got unsteadily to his feet. His stained hands knotted into

fists. His tousled hair and whiskers bristled with resentment. In his tattered clothes he seemed a scarecrow that even the wind might whip as he stamped around to face big Bill.

"I ain't askin' nobody else to fight my fights. Lou can't kick me! I may clean spittoons, but I ain't no dog. If you want somethin' to chaw on, jest bite off the end of a spittoon-cleaner's fist!"

His knotted knuckles cracked with a clean clip on Bill Garst's jaw.

The big man's head was jarred to one side, but the force of the blow was not enough to unbalance him. With a bellow he seized the lapels of the tattered coat, and the power of his jerk snapped the swamper upright. His right palm smacked the whiskered cheek until red showed. He shook him as a mastiff might worry a lesser breed. The swamper, powerless in his grip, kicked and clawed ineffectually.

"Stop that!"

THE swamper felt himself dropped like something hot. He fell dazed and breathless between the two men, with just strength enough to scurry out of their way. He saw the newcomer step outward in a fighting position.

"Beating up a man who can't resist goes against the grain. I never interfere in an even fight, but I won't stand that kind of bullying."

"Oh, yuh won't. Then maybe yuh need a lesson—" Garst struck, heavily, viciously as he spoke, a trick to catch the other off guard.

Strangely, even incomprehensibly, in the swamper's eyes, the lean chin was not there. The newcomer swayed at the hips, and big Bill Garst's hamlike fist met only air. The bully was carried off balance by the impetus of his own blow and, before he could straighten, a hard right caught him in the mouth and set him backward a foot. The swamper saw only a blur of fists as the stranger bored in. Garst doubled against the bar, his mouth bleeding, a stupid, unbelieving light in his eyes. His arms came up to cover his face.

Then the swamper saw Pug Negley's hand slip upward from below the bar, saw the heavy bottle gripped by its neck. His strained throat tried to form words, to shout a warning, but no words came. Pug's arm went back over his shoulder as he leaned across the bar a little behind the newcomer. The swamper could do no more than throw up a pointing finger.

The next movements were almost blurred in his reddened eyes. He knew that the newcomer leaped back, and almost simultaneously a roar shook the front of the room. The heavy bottle burst as if from an internal explosion, and glass and liquor rained on the bar. The stranger was well back now, both Negley and Garst under the quick arc of his gun.

"So that's the lay of it!" he commented. "All of a clique, eh? Just keep those mitts high, bartender. Of any sorry pair of rascals, yuh two are the worst."

Garst's arms came down. Tiny rivulets of blood ran from his cut lips. His eyes glowed evilly. "Yuh never licked me, stranger. In an ace I'd a-doubled yuh up like a jack-knife. I ain't 'lowable for what the bartender done. If yuh didn't already have the drop—"

The swamper lay, still sprawled upon the floor, where every incident stamped itself upon his brain. He saw the newcomer's gun snick back into leather, heard his cold voice.

"I haven't got the drop now. If yuh got a yen to claw leather, cut yoreself loose."

Bill Garst stared, but he made no move. Twice he swallowed hard. Fear loomed in his eyes. He just stood, eyes unblinking, hands well away from his belt.

The stranger backed towards the door. The swamper felt his heart sink. After this fellow went, he would catch it!

"And, listen," the cool voice continued, "I'll be coming into this place often. If I see one mark of abuse on that swamper, it's me and you, big fella." The batwing doors closed behind him.

Bill Garst did not swear. He stood staring at the vibrating doors like a man in a dream. Negley with shaking hands wiped up the bar. A frustrat-

ing dismay held the men in the room silent. The thoughts of all were finally voiced by Soapy Willis. "Goda-mighty!" he said. "Did you see that draw?"

PREPARATORY to resuming his labors, the swamper picked up his polishing rag. Then it was that he noted a glint of metal on the floor near the bar, the edge of a shield nearly trampled into the sawdust. A fear squeezed at his heart. He began to edge along the footrail, nearer to the fallen object. His fingers reached out cautiously.

Garst's fingers came down upon them. The big man bent and picked up the disc. His eyes became saucered orbs. Soapy Willis came slipping towards him. He, too, stared at the object.

"A ranger's badge! I was right. That hombre is a ranger."

The stemmed anger of Bill Garst found vent in words. Oaths exploded from his lips. He hurled the shield against the wall and it fell to roll into a corner.

"Now do we drift, Bill?" questioned Soapy.

Garst shoved his henchman aside. He strode back to his chair and dropped heavily. "Shut up, yuh jughead, I gotta think."

The swamper went back to his wiping.

The stranger came again to the Antelope Bar that afternoon to find a chastened and silent gang. He took a seat by the street window, ordered a beer and slowly enjoyed it. For an hour he sat, his eyes partly on the street and partly on the room. In a far corner Garst and his men played poker, wordlessly and with almost painful attention to the pasteboards.

For two days the same procedure held. Often the silent, lightning gunman visited the barroom and invariably chose a seat by the street window. Covertly and hostilely Garst and his henchmen studied him. And during this time the Calibar stage went through, safe and unmolested.

It was the third afternoon that Bill Garst's hand smacked suddenly upon his thigh. The stranger had just left. Garst strode with long steps toward the street window and peered out. A deep cunning was glinting in his eyes. For seconds he stared outward. "I'm goin' to get that hombre," he declared.

Soapy's jaw sagged. "Brace him? Not even *you* kin match his draw, Bill."

"I ain't matchin' him."

"Dry-gulch him, huh?" whispered the taciturn Hodder. "Then count me out. To plug a ranger in the back would bring a squad of 'em to town. They'd hunt us from one end of the West to the other."

Garst swung storming on his two mates. "Yuh fools, think I ain't got brains. I ain't bracin' him, an' I ain't dry-gulchin' him. I'm gettin' him safe —savvy? When I finish that hombre, I'm shootin' at yuh, Soapy."

SOAPY'S face paled. "At me?"

"Yeah, at you. But keep yore britches on. I'm missin'. Now, lissen. The blacksmith shop's almost across the street. He'll be settin' in full view right there at that window."

"Gad!" muttered Willis, the scheme beginning to dawn in his mind. "It might work at that."

"Work? It's bound to work. We tell nobody. Afterwards we explain we had an argument at cards. Yuh spend the night at Rockin' Chair Annie's, Soapy. Tomorrow mornin' yuh watch the street. Yuh'll see that damn ranger come in here. While he's comin' I slip out the back door here, see? I cross the street to the blacksmith shop. That'll be yore signal, Soapy. Yuh come outa Annie's with yore hardware on an' come right down the side of the street by the saloon. When you get even with the window, I step from around the corner of the blacksmith shop and yell somethin' at yuh. Yuh grab for leather. I grab. Before anybody can guess the set-up, I put two slugs through the window. It ain't more'n thirty paces an' I can't miss. Meanwhile yuh keep poppin' at me—wild. Hodder yells from the saloon an' that stops our fight. It'll just be an accident, damned unfortunate, but that's all. Nobody can prove I wasn't shootin' at Soapy."

An oath cracked from Carl Hodder's lips. The swamper, his hands loaded with cleaned cuspidors, stood near them gawking.

"Hell, that hombre heard!" yelled Hodder.

The doddering swamper gulped. Fear widened his reddened eyes. "I ain't heard nothin'," he stammered. "Even if I did I got sense."

"You'd better have sense," tersely declared Garst. "If yuh try to tip that ranger off so he don't come, or if yuh try any funny business here in the saloon, it's yore finish. Hodder'll be watchin'. It'll be a slug between yore eyes. Understand?"

"I understand," said the swamper.

Morning sunshine fell mellow on the street of Antelope. Few pedestrians stirred at this early hour. The neatly dressed stranger left the Cattleman's Hotel and crossed briskly toward the Antelope Bar. Almost at the same moment Bill Garst swaggered out of an alley and crossed leisurely toward the blacksmith shop. A few moments later Soapy Willis came out of Annie's rooming house two blocks down the street.

He walked slowly, neared the saloon, came abreast of it.

The huge form of Bill Garst launched itself around the corner of the blacksmith shop. His six-gun swung low and forward in its greased holster. A sullen cloud of wrath contorted his features.

"Soapy!"

The word winged itself across the street. The walking man stiffened and whirled as upon a pivot, his eyes pinning on the big man across the street.

"Yuh sneakin', slaver-bellied card cheat!" roared Bill Garst. "I told yuh to git outa town. Now—take it!"

The *pow* of a six gun crashed once—twice. A tinkle of shattered glass laced with the thunder of the detonations. Starred holes appeared in the window just beyond Soapy's head. A hat that had been visible a moment before disappeared.

Then Soapy Willis cut loose, and splinters ripped from the smithy's weather-boarding as wild bullets tore into the wood.

OUT of the alley behind Soapy a figure raced, a man with tattered clothes and tousled hair. A six-gun swung aloft in his hand. He launched himself over the last six feet like a leaping beast, and the heavy gun arced downward to a sickening thud. Soapy Willis slumped earthward like an emptied sack.

Bill Garst stood for a moment frozen, startled to inaction by this sudden conflict across the street. He saw his henchman go down like a stricken steer, and in his place appeared the grizzled features of the saloon swamper.

"Steady, Bill Garst, I'm holding you," called this person.

"Holding me? Yuh interferin' ole fool! For what?"

"Murder!"

"For accidentally shootin' that ranger? No, no! I can't help it if he was in the way."

Men were stepping from the hotel now to hear the words. Other citizens came racing from the houses.

"No, Garst, not the ranger. Who said anything about that? Yore own words give yuh away for attempted murder. That feller's all right. Yuh shot at a hat and a coat I hung on a chair. I moved that feller's table before he came in, so he wasn't in line of fire. It's them killings in the stage-coach robberies!"

"Why, you blabbing—"

Two guns crashed almost as one. Garst shifted and fired even as he talked, but the swamper's gun beat his by the fraction of a second. The big man swung half around, as if struck by a fist in the right shoulder. His weapon dropped from paralyzed fingers. For a moment he clutched at his right arm, then bent, scooping with his left hand for the fallen Colt.

The swamper's gun spat again. The dropped weapon spun upon its cylinder, coming to a stop six feet from its fumbling owner. Garst straightened, incredulous surprise in his eyes. He stared at the man who walked towards him, no longer bent and doddering, but a man with steady, unwavering movements.

"Just lift that good hand and hold it. Don't try yelling for help. Hodder and

Negley are sitting behind the bar handcuffed together. I had to work fast while Soapy was walking up the street, but I found out one thing. Cal Hodder came unraveled mighty quick when the jig was up. As for that stranger, he's a cattle-buyer from Las Animas waiting for a herd to come in from Baylor. And, as for you—I'm arresting yuh for the murder of that stagecoach driver."

"Why yuh're nothin' but a swamper—"

"No. Because I tumbled off a freight wagon a week ago and took the swamper job yuh sorta misjudged me. Maybe I do need a shave. And if I washed the flour out of my hair and the lemon juice out of my eyes, I'd look younger and different to yuh. As far as that badge is concerned it dropped out of my pocket when you shook me. You see, Garst, I happen to be Ranger Jim Heywood."

"But that ranger badge!" cried Garst. "I seen it right after that stranger left, and—"

"So yuh did. But it dropped out of my pocket when yuh shook me. Yuh see, Garst, I happen to be Jim Heywood—the ranger yuh sorta been expectin'."

EARLY AMERICAN SHEEP BRANDS

NEW HAMPSHIRE'S equivalent to the Western cattle brands has lately been unearthed by Works Progress Administration employes on the Historical Records Survey in the discovery of an old volume in the archives of the town of Sanbornton. The book contains drawings of a series of composite sheep's ears made by some painstaking scribe who faithfully set down the owner's name, the page in the volume where the record of the mark may be found, and the marks cut in the ear.

A typical entry reads:

"Winthrop Dearborn's Mark is a Swallow's Tail in the left ear and two half pennies on the underside of the right ear. Recorded May 25, 1830. John Carr, T. Clerk."

According to Dr. R. G. Wood, director of the survey, this particular Sanbornton volume constitutes, "what is probably the most peculiar index in New Hampshire." It was found by the workers in the course of their regular routine listing of town records of which an inventory will later be published.

Except for the painstaking index, the Sanbornton record is no different from that found in other New Hampshire villages. By the statute of 1816, the town clerks were required to keep due account of animal marks, and received a fee of six cents for each mark recorded.

This law was framed when New Hampshire was an agricultural state and numerous flocks of sheep dotted the hillside pastures. Even in towns of moderate size, there were enough sheep owners so that their marks or brands had to be registered to prevent confusion in ownership.

There was a penalty for altering, removing, or defacing a mark just as in the case of Western cattle brands at a later date.

WEST of the PECOS

In Which Ranger Adams Braves the Dangers of Renegade Country

By SYL MacDOWELL

Author of "Bullet Harvest," Sardines and Six-Guns," etc.

THE dark, deep gorge was a natural boundary, beyond it, even the landscape changed. The hills stood more rugged against the sky, and the spiny growth that hugged them seemed harsher as it clawed at the *tapaderos* of Ranger Adams' stirrups.

Those stirrup leathers were still wet from the ford when he sighted the town. Owl's Hole, a clutter of flat-roofed adobes, looked as toughly resistant as the *caliche* ridge that hemmed it in from the north.

The trail followed the ridge, and little, telltale puffs of whitish dust rose from the bay's shuffling hoofs as it neared the end of its weary journey. Ranger Adams was weary, too. But he forced himself to alertness as the trail dipped steeply down toward a watchful knot of hard-looking citizens, forewarned of his coming by that dust from the ridge.

Here, west of the Pecos, Ranger Adams somberly reflected, the raw, hard land seemed to have imparted its bold quality to the human beings. The men, six or seven of them, sat or sprawled in a splash of shadow by an open, whitewashed doorway overhung with a garish, red-lettered sign that read:

The Ranger appeared with gun drawn

CANTINA DIABLO
Curly Cadman, Proprietor

On a bench, by the doorway, one of the loafers sprawled widely, occupying most of it. He whittled idly at a stick, eyes hidden under a sloppy hat brim. He was a big, thick-shouldered man. As Ranger Adams reined up he said something in an undertone that made the others snicker unpleasantly.

Ranger Adams dismounted and dropped his reins. Two weeks of dust and glaring heat, and unbroken travel from San Antone, made him appear older than his twenty years, and the rigors of short sleep and shorter rations thinned his long shadow. He cocked an ear to something else the hunched whittler was saying.

"So yuh see, there ain't no diff'rence between a rustler, who lives offen other men's sweat, and a public job-holder, who eats up their tax money, ridin' around, pokin' his nose into private affairs."

The listeners grinned furtively, but they had no welcoming word or look for the Ranger. He started for the cantina doorway. The big whittler pivoted on the bench, so that his feet blocked the entrance.

There could be no mistake about this deliberate, scornful effrontery. Ranger Adams didn't pause in his stride. He stamped down hard on the extended feet, then wheeled and kicked them out of his way, whirling the offender and toppling him from the bench.

The man sprang up, cursing, and with knife upraised, menacingly, but Ranger Adams was inside, at the bar. He whacked it with the palm of a hand, startling a dusky attendant into blinking wakefulness.

"Cadman—where is he?" Ranger Adams demanded.

The Mexican shrugged.

"It is siesta time," he grumbled. "The senor, he sleeps—"

"Rouse him."

The Mexican youth's dark eyes went obstinate. He smoothed his shiny hair with a slim, brown hand.

He turned his back and went languidly to arranging a pyramid of glasses in front of the back mirror. Ranger Adams reached across the bar, seized the impudent youth by the shoulder, and spun him roughly, facing him.

"You heard, *chico*," he said. His voice was low and restrained, but his jaws were tense. He gripped the youth for an instant, then flung him away from him. The pyramid of glasses toppled crashingly.

RESULTS came almost instantly. In a room beyond feet sounded, and in an archway a woman, shrilling complaints, suddenly appeared. She was a bold-eyed blonde, wrapped in a flimsy silken robe. She gestured angrily with a cigarette.

"Throw him out, Pedro!" she cried.

Pedro gave Ranger Adams one scared look, and decided to pick up broken glass instead.

"Five of them, senorita, he bust!" he quavered. "*Por Dios*, all the way from Guadalajara they come!"

The big blonde advanced to the front of the bar.

"Pay up, then get!" she crackled. "Two bits apiece, and don't come back!"

Ranger Adams' gray eyes had slitted in that brief flare of hostility, but they slowly widened now as he stared at this woman. She was older than he by about ten years. But those years had hardened an otherwise comely face. She flipped a tasseled cord over one smooth, white shoulder and thrust the cigarette between her too-bright lips.

"Lay a dollar and a quarter on the line, stranger, then vamoose!" she sneered.

Ranger Adams seemed not to have heard, nor did he pry his eyes from her face.

"Reckon I know, now, why you never wrote," he said finally. "And you had Jack believin' you was in San Francisco, actin' at a theater!"

The woman's face went suddenly slack. She took the cigarette from her mouth and dropped it to the floor with a limp hand. She came a little closer, along the bar, clutching it for support. She was very white, all at once, and the pulse throbbed in her bare throat.

"What—what's that you say?" she breathed.

Ranger Adams' poise had returned.

"He was mighty proud o' his big sister, Jack was. She was his last thought, her name was the last word he spoke."

The woman swiftly put a trembling hand on Ranger Adams' sleeve. Her eyes were stricken, and her tone had become pleading.

"What do you mean?" she gusted. "What—what happened to—to Jack? Who are you?"

Ranger Adams' solemn eyes held her anxious gaze steadily.

"He died in my arms, Katherine, after the last Comanche outbreak. And no braver Ranger than Jack Morley ever rode!"

Her hand fell from his sleeve and went to her eyes. She uttered a little moan as her head drooped. It surprised him, this quick change in her. It did not seem to him that such a woman could soften so easily.

"Thank God that he didn't know," she said muffledly. "About me—this place—" She gave him a quick, piercing look. "But you, how did you recognize *me?* I have never seen you before in my life!"

Ranger Adams drew a large, silver watch from a pocket of his vest. He snapped open the case, and held it in front of her.

"He gave it to me, when he died. Yore picture is in it."

Katherine Morley gazed fixedly at the picture, and Ranger Adams added awkwardly:

"Yuh've changed some, Katherine."

She exploded a bitter laugh.

"Yes," she said, "some."

He snapped the watch shut and offered it to her. She shrank away.

"No!" she cried. "I'm not fit to touch anything that was his! He gave it to you. He must have thought a lot of you."

RANGER ADAMS returned the watch to his pocket.

"Jack Morley was my chum," he said gravely, "a brother, more like. Seein' as how he felt, it gives me the right to do what a brother would do. If you want to leave this place—"

A voice from the archway interrupted him.

"She don't, Ranger."

Ranger Adams' eyes flicked to the man standing there. He was fat, forty-ish, and might have been considered handsome in a smooth, oily fashion, for all the fact that his crisp hair was tousled, and his wrinkled shirt of fine linen open at the throat. His lips smiled suavely, but his eyes were cold as a snake's.

"Cactus Kate stays here," he said. "They're my orders."

So Katherine Morley was the notorious gunwoman, Cactus Kate.

"You're Cadman," Ranger Adams said. It was a statement rather than a question.

"Yuh seem to have a gift for knowin' folks, Ranger. We're plumb flattered." He yawned, raising a smooth, pale hand politely to cover the yawn. "How about a drink, eh?"

"Not on a stomach that's been empty since noon yesterday."

Cadman's jowls shook to a chuckle.

"Travelin' light, eh? Senora Gomez, down the street, serves very good food; it is the place with the goats. With something under yore belt, Ranger, mebbe yuh'll tell us what brings yuh to Owl's Hole."

"I can tell you now, Cadman." Ranger Adams paused, eyes swerving for an instant toward the street. His bay had dragged rein, coming up into the shade. Just beyond the doorway, knife shavings whirled in a puff of wind. "My orders," he went on, "are to whittle this town down to its size."

Curly Cadman's eyebrows arched.

"Hardly more than thirty population, and two-thirds of that Mexican," he said. "Is it worth yore while?"

"Owl's Hole is a hangout for the dodgy citizens who inhabit the Pecos Gorge," Ranger Adams stated, "they're plenty worth a man's while. When I come back, Cadman, from Senora Gomez' place, you can sort o' post me on yore customers as they drift in."

Cadman's manner changed to something that resembled irritability.

"I can," he agreed, "but I don't aim to, Ranger. What folks do outside my place, here, ain't none o' my concern. What they spend, that's my business,

(Continued on page 102)

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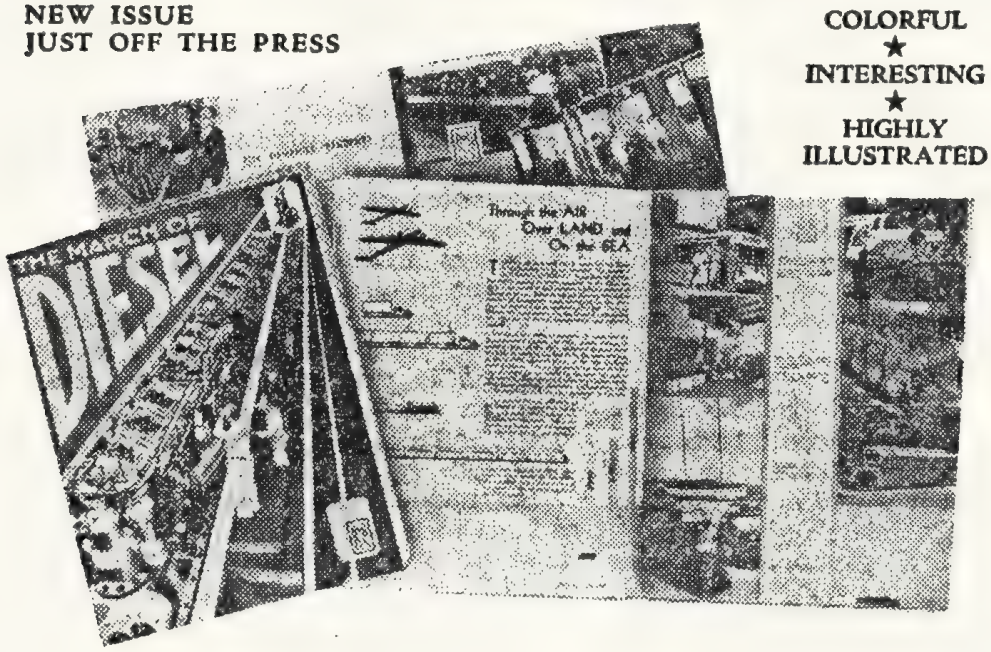

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(Continued from page 100)
how they get it, isn't."

"I wonder," said Ranger Adams. He left, then, and with the help of the goats, found the house of Senora Gomez, and his bay fed on wild hay in her pasture while Ranger Adams attacked a savory meal in the senora's spotless kitchen. To the senora's small, ragged boy, who served him, he gave a silver dollar and whispered instructions.

It was lamplight time when he strolled back to the Cantina Diablo.

It was on such missions as this that he missed Jack Morley. That feeling had been powerfully revived by that unexpected meeting with his absent chum's sister.

IT was plain that Katherine Morley was miserable. It would be easy to persuade her to leave, if some way were provided. But it would not be so easy to overcome Cadman's objections.

"Cactus Kate's" glamorous presence gave his dive distinction. She was of finer fiber than the run of people who went there, though the environment, Ranger Adams realized, was working its inevitable change on her. Just as all other things west of the Pecos changed and coarsened.

She was singing, to the accompaniment of a guitar, when he re-entered the cantina. It was some ballad, as falsely gay as the tinseled gown she wore.

Early darkness had brought a change to the place. The hitch-rack in front was crowded, and the bar was crowded, too, and noisy. But the voices hushed as the Ranger stepped inside. The Mexican youth behind the bar looked past his customers, eyes hard as obsidian, and he said:

"Beyond, pliz," as he jerked a thumb toward the room beyond the archway. "Senor Cadman, he waits."

With a motion to the guitar player, Cactus Kate cut her ballad short. She whispered something to her accompanist, then began to sing, "Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes."

Ranger Adams looked up at her. There was some mysterious signal in her face, something he could not fathom. She was on the refrain, the repetition of the title words. Her voice, a rich contralto, had some vibrant quality, as though she strove to convey a message. Did he imagine it, or was she emphasizing the word, "only"?

"Drink *only* with thine eyes." That was what she seemed to be warning him.

He paused for an instant, then went through the archway into that region beyond which he had not yet seen.

It was more than a room. It was an open-roofed patio, porched all around, and along the porch doors led into chambers in the adobe that enclosed the patio in all four sides.

A well-arranged trap, Ranger Adams thought. At a table, close to a small fountain in the middle of the patio, Cadman sat. In front of him was a bottle and a candle. He was smoking a long, thin cigar of rank, border tobacco.

He nodded and motioned Ranger Adams to a chair. He banged on the table with the bottle. The Mexican youth's countenance appeared in the archway.

"Glasses," Cadman ordered.

The youth brought them—three of them, Ranger Adams observed. Cadman uncorked the bottle. Ranger Adams flattened a palm over the top of his glass.

"No, thanks," he said curtly.

Cadman's eyebrows arched.

"Empty still?" he queried. "Didn't the Senora Gomez—?"

A voice came from a shadowy wall.

"He can't take hard likker," someone said sarcastically. "Bein' a reformer, a friend to distressed damsels—"

"Shut up, Tanby!" interrupted Cadman sharply. "Come over here. Set down and let's talk this thing over."

Tanby came. Ranger Adams recognized him as the whittling loafer of the afternoon. Tanby's yellow-brown eyes regarded him with silent hostility.

"Now, then, Ranger," Cadman said with a show of affability. "I'm obliged to you for pointin' out the need for some law west o' the Pecos. So here's what I done. I appointed Tanby, here, marshal o' Owl's Hole. Let's forget our personal feelin's and drink to his success."

TANBY dragged up a chair and slumped into it. Ranger Adams coolly lifted his glass and tossed it into the fountain.

"If I lacked a good reason for not drinking before," he retorted calmly, "I got a mighty good one now."

Tanby growled and started to rise. Cadman pushed him back in his chair.

"Yore attitude, it's all w r o n g, Ranger," he said persuasively. "Jest because you an' Tanby had a little tiff ain't no cause for—"

Ranger Adams stood up.

"The thing is this, Cadman," he said crisply. "Yuh've got no more authority than a jack-rabbit to appoint anybody marshal of this town. Besides which, a town marshal's authority wouldn't extend to the Pecos Gorge, and the hide-outs of outlaws, thieves and murderers there. There's jest one law west of the Pecos—Ranger law, backed up by the State of Texas, under the signature of the governor. If yuh're plumb eager to aid justice, like you claim, come with me into the bar and point out the shady characters in there, the known owl-hooters and badmen."

Cadman managed to keep his temper under control with a visible effort. He toyed with the bottle.

"Ranger," he said, finally, "yuh ain't the most diplomatic man I ever met up with. You can't expect to catch flies with vinegar, yuh know."

"Meaning what?"

"Well, I might be persuaded to cooperate with yuh, but I won't be rawhided into it. I ask yuh once more—let's be friends. Let's start out with a friendly drink, me an' you."

The refrain of Katherine Morley's song was running through Ranger Adams' brain as Cadman lifted the bottle. He held it oddly, one hand grasping the neck, the other pressed to the bottom.

Ranger Adams took a sidestep, so that the bottle was between him and the candle. It was of dark glass, but the light reflected through it was enough to convince him.

He had heard of such trick contrivances. A bottle with an extra container inside of it. The inner part filled with

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(Continued from page 103)
a potion quite unlike the good liquor surrounding it, and operated by a plunger at the bottom.

Cadman poured out the two glasses with amber-colored liquor. He raised his glass, smiling across its brim.

"Here's to law an' order," he said.

Ranger Adams pushed the glass that had been poured for him in front of the glowering Tanby.

"Drink," he ordered tersely.

Tanby shot a surprised, questioning look at Cadman. Cadman's smile had faded as Tanby grabbed the drink.

"He's a tee-totaler, like I said, Curly," he grunted. "A goody-goody boy, a milk-fed yearling. Here goes."

Cadman shot out a hand to stop him, but Ranger Adams knocked the hand away. In the same move he wrested the bottle from Cadman. He tapped it against the rock side of the fountain. The brown glass shattered, exposing the container within it. The contents of this, Ranger Adams poured into the fountain.

CADMAN started to get up, but the muzzle of the Ranger's Colt put him back in his chair. Tanby's eyes were round and staring as one hand strayed to his throat.

"Look," Ranger Adams said to him.

Tanby pushed himself up, rushed to the fountain, and peered into it. There had been a few small fish swimming in it. They were coming to the surface, now, belly up. The man uttered a terrified howl and hurled himself on Cadman. He was going for his knife.

"Yuh pizened me, yuh low-down, mealy-mouthed stink-weasel!" he shrieked.

They tangled and fell to the floor, struggling in a death-grip. The noise in the bar, and Katherine's singing, was enough to drown out Tanby's yells, and the tumbling crash of table and chairs. Ranger Adams turned his back unconcernedly and walked back through the archway, holstering his Colt.

There was more than one way of administering the law. He would have no more trouble with Cadman or Tanby. With Cadman gone, the Cantina Diablo would no longer exist as a gathering-place for the lawless breed that infested the Pecos Gorge. The crooks would scatter from that favored stronghold, for it was an axiom among the Texas Rangers that such vermin would not long remain in isolation. They preferred towns, lively joints, wherein to squander their ill-gained loot.

Eyes turned on him at his reappearance. The Mexican youth behind the bar looked surprised. Ranger Adams raised a hand, and the guitar player's hands strayed from the strings and Katherine Morley's voice stopped in the middle of a stanza. There was something in the young lawman's face that arrested attention.

"Finish yore drinks, everybody, then clear out," he commanded in a loud, clear voice.

"Porque?" yapped the youth behind the bar. "For why?"

"This layout is closing tonight, now," Ranger Adams rapped out. Behind him a muffled scream sounded, accompanied by the sinister thudding of a knife. The Mexican youth flitted for the archway. Ranger Adams' Colt was out again.

He shrank back.

"The Cantina Diablo," the Ranger declared, "is no more. And yuh're out of a job, Katherine. Go pack up such as you can take on a saddle behind you."

She stepped down from a small, raised platform, where the gaping guitar player had dropped his instrument to his knees. One of the men stepped in front of her.

"Hold on, Kate," he said gruffly. "This damn whippersnapper, he can't make me—"

"You're drunk, Butch Evert," she broke in sharply. "Do like the boy says."

If Butch Evert had been sober, he might have made his play more cautiously. He grabbed for his six-gun, but Cactus Kate was quicker. She had it, and forced him to the bar. She backed toward Ranger Adams and the archway. Her hand gripped the six-gun purposely.

"So long, boys," she said. "Don't

start any trouble. Remember, I know too much about you all. Clear out of Texas, that's my advice."

She plucked Ranger Adams' sleeve, and hurried through the patio, entered one of the doors that led off the porch, and a moment later wrenched open the shutters of a window that gave to the outside.

The two of them climbed out. Ranger Adams carrying a pillow slip stuffed with such feminine articles that would withstand trail travel.

A FEW yards away, at the appointed spot, the Senora Gomez' small boy squatted in the soft, warm starlight, patiently holding the reins of two fresh, saddled horses.

Ranger Adams tied the stuffed pillow slip to the cantle of one of the saddles, then held a stirrup for the blonde woman to mount. She got into leather with the ease of a practiced horsewoman, and he was glad of that, because it was a long, hard pasear back to San Antone.

They rode for a mile or two along the *caliche* ridge without speaking. The woman seemed to sense some disturbance in her companion's mind.

"You got something sticking in your craw, Ranger," she presently spoke up. "What is it?"

Ranger Adams shifted guiltily, eyes fixed between the ears of his horse.

"The fact is, Katherine, I—I reckon I lied to you. Jest a little," he admitted. "I did it to sort of jar you, make you want to quit."

"You lied? About what?"

"Well, the fact is, Jack ain't dead. At least he wasn't when I left San Antone, where he's attached to a headquarters company, where I—I won this watch from him in a poker game last payday."

To his surprise, Cactus Kate greeted this revelation with a careless laugh.

"I should o' thought yuh'd take it different," he said resentfully. "There'll be a whole lot for you to patch up with yore brother. It—it won't be easy to keep things from him."

Her merriment only increased. It rasped on Ranger Adams' nerves. He was beginning to doubt the wisdom of

(Continued on page 112)

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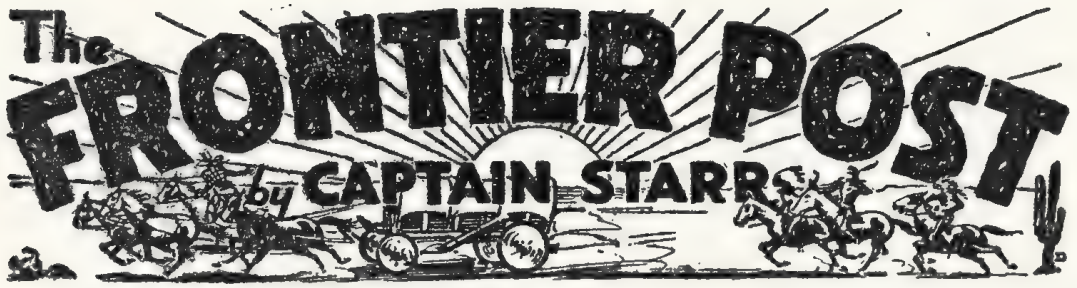

IN MY young days in the Southwest, gals and galluses, there was talk about wild camels that still survived in the wild, uninhabited parts o' west Texas. And on across the desert country, through New Mexico into Arizona.

Even yet, wild-eyed yahoos lope into the towns, to revive the report. Swearing on a stack o' Bibles that they sure enough seen a humpy-backed critter, with its long, knobby legs and mournful face, grazin' on Texas grass.

It may be so that some camels exist along the border. I never seen one. Though at times, when heat willies twist up the scenery, and a arrowweed in the distance looms high as a flagpole, a hoss and rider takes on magnificent proportions which might be mistook for any sort o' monster.

A RIGHT FAMILIAR SIGHT

The fact is, camels did one time flourish in Texas. Seventy-five o' the critters was brought from Egypt in 1855 and landed at Indianola, Texas, on the gulf. It was the idea of Jeff Davis, then Secretary of War, He got Congress to appropriate $30,000 to buy 'em, at $400 per head.

The camels turned out to be right satisfactory. The Army used 'em for exploration and survey trips. They got to be a right familiar sight, all over the desert country, and as far as southern California.

They had only one drawback. They didn't savvy the cuss words of Army mule skinners. And them mule skinners, as well as the Army pack mules, plum resented the camel competition. Mainly because the camel was faster on long pasears, more durable, and wasn't bothered by long, hot marches without water.

Then along came the Civil War, and the government camels, they were scattered all over Texas. Jeff Davis, he become President o' the Confederacy. He got the Confederate postoffice department to round up a band o' strays. And to put 'em to work as overland blockade runners.

END OF THE CAMEL TRAIL

Well, folks, that turned out to be the end of the camels. Because they hazed 'em clean over into the bayou country o' Louisiana. They'd got along fine on the desert, but Louisiana, she's no desert. In the Tangipahoa River swamps, the camels drank themselves to death!

And the big beasts o' burden dropped, the drivers had to stash their loads. Some o' the stuff was mighty valuable. Such as bags of old gold pieces and bullion, which was being moved to the Alabama headquarters of President Jeff Davis.

The coins dated back to 1798. Some had the profile of Charles IV, the Spanish king when that country owned Louisiana. Where these doubloons and pieces of eight come from, that still is a mystery. Pirate loot, a lot of it unquestionably was.

THE HIDDEN PACK

Now among those blockade runners was a Texan named Holmes. One day, while dodgin' Federal troops, a camel died on him. And he dug fast and furious, this rebel Holmes did. He hid the dead camel's pack deep in a sandy field, about 60 miles northeast o' New Orleans. Then he vamoosed with what was left of his camels.

And now, gals and galluses, our story leaps 75 years. A young jasper named Lawrence Holmes was plowing in his father's field, near Robert, Louisiana. A sandy field. The plowshare grated. The mouldboard turned up something that shone bright in the sun.

Young Holmes, he grabbed up a handful o' sand sifted it out between his fingers, and there was a strange looking coin. He took it to his dad. Robert, son o' that blockade runner Holmes.

"The coin is a Spanish piece of eight," says Robert Holmes. "Let's us go plow that field mighty thorough, son."

They did. They unearthed, piece by piece, lost, buried treasure left by those oldtime "ships o' the desert" which up and died on Grandpa Holmes and some o' those other brave southern boys who fought in the Civil War.

And now, they tell me, the Holmes family is plowing in season and out. With the prospect that their sandy field will produce a crop a heap more valuable than goobers, or cotton, or yams or corn.

BUT—NEVER NO GOLD!

Me, I'd ruther find a cache like that than to see a camel. Wouldn't you, gals and galluses? I've prodded around, time and again, to find historical things. In old adobe ruins, and at old Injun camps. Found a Spanish dime one time. Plenty arrowheads, naturally, and beads and Injun trinkets. But never no gold.

Nearest thing to it I know about, through my own experience, was when a Mexican hombre was shoveling in a old dobey pit and come on a barrel o' whiskey. Turned out, a Army fort once stood on the spot.

The whiskey had evaporated down till there wasn't much left in the barrel. But it was mellow as honey. Just about the finest corn likker in Texas.

It didn't go into no museum.

CYPRESS LASTS

Funny thing about buried relics in places like east Texas, where the soil is wet, like in the bayous country, iron rusts away. Rawhide soon feeds the worms. Even brass turns to green mold, and ordinary wood rots. But cypress seems to last indefinite.

Reckon the Head Ranger figured things out right when he set cypress trees to growin' in the swamps. Cypress has turned out to be right valuable for building lumber in wet regions. If you ever go through a cypress swamp, you'll observe little knobs that grow on half-exposed roots. We used to call 'em breathers, or cypress knees. They make nice souvenirs. Cut yourself off a cypress knee, boil it so's you can peel the bark off, then dry the white, twisty piece in the sun.

They come in all sorts o' odd shapes. Are light and easy to whittle into fancy dewdads.

West Texas is altogether different. No swamps, no cypress. Out yonderly, the natural cover is mesquite. I've wondered a heap why mesquite wasn't put to some special use besides stovewood. It's hard as mahogany, with a satiny grain, and in a dry climate is as imperishable as cypress is in humid, rainy sections. It ain't at all uncommon to see good, sound mesquite fence posts a half-century old. Planted when Texas Rangers packed a pair o' pliers in their saddle kaks.

DON'T CUT WIRE!

That brings me around to remindin' you how to ride across a barbed wire fence, folks. Don't ever cut a man's wire. In the old days, that was as good as proof of rustling.

The thing to do is to pull the staples out along the top wire, for two-three posts. Push the wire down with your foot, lead your horse across, so's he can step over. Then wallop those staples back in the post, and the fence is undamaged.

WOVEN WIRE

With sheep grazin' taking hold on old cattle ranges, you don't see oldtime barbed wire fences so much anymore. Woven wire has took their place. Only way to get through is when you come to a gate.

Woven wire has been cussed almost as much as Texas cattlemen used to cuss nesters' barbed wire. I've cussed those mesh fences, myownself. But I was moved to admire it, awhile back, in going through a steel mill, 'way up in Duluth, Minnesota.

Dog-goned if I'd o' believed it. But the fencing rolled out of a machine where a man

(Continued on page 118)

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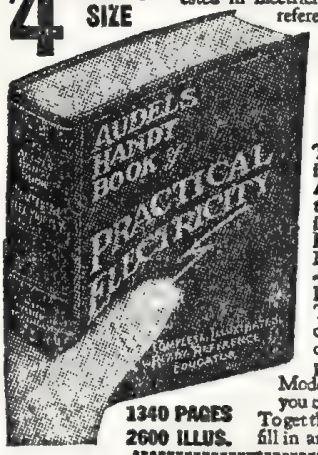

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fed iron bars in at one end. I'd never give much of a thought about how it was made, up until then.

Time's coming when you can haze a steer into one end of a machine, and sirloins pile out at the other. With a spout at the side that drops a pair o' boots once in a while, or a felt hat.

The idea ain't exactly a unusual one. The Texas Rangers nowadays toss a outlaw in the calaboose, and expect after a few years to see him come out a honest, law-abidin' citizen.

COLT PUNISHMENT

They're trying to make the machine o' justice work thataway, but no man's ever perfected it. In the old days, a crime committed with a Colt was right often punished by a Colt, and that settled the problem permanent. The Texas Rangers sure made life easy for the judges and juries in the old days.

The law is sort o' swerving around to the style of thinking we had in Texas in pioneer times. In most every State, extra heavy sentences are provided for crimes committed with a gun.

In most States, if a shooting happens during the course of a robbery, every one o' the robbers share in the gun guilt, whether

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they all packed weapons or not. That's good, sound justice, I claim. The crook that threatens a life should gamble his own.

Every man who ever packed a gun for the cause o' justice, in the days when crime and punishment often consisted of two .45 cartridges, fired off close together, done some deep thinking about the law, and the best way to uphold it.

The principal object, then, was to prevent a offender from repeating the act. What they're trying to do now is to discourage future offenders. Prison wardens lecture, and sleuths bark out radio talk about crime don't pay.

THE LAW HAS THE EDGE

There ain't no argument about that. Even a crook will tell you that a criminal career is the unhappiest life pursuit in creation, win or lose. That's why lawmen, from Wild Bill Hickok on down, have claimed that the law always has the edge on any crook, because he knows he's on the right side, and the crook knows it, too.

The meanest, low-down varmint on earth is a thief. Whether he's a sneak thief or a hold-up. At heart he's a cheat and a loafer, to prey on the fruit of another man's toil. He ain't got gumption enough to make his own way. A man can kill in the heat of passion, and live to perform good deeds and lead a useful life. But a thief is rotten clear through, and whatever method of stealing he goes in for, there's no glory or glamor in his act.

LOOTERS

Oldtime lawmen, like the Rangers, had some respect for a killer. But they had nothing but scorn and contempt for a thief. I often think back to the time of the Gal-

(Continued on page 110)

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veston flood, in September, 1900. In disasters like that, the foundation of a man's character are laid bare. Just like that hurricane laid bare the foundations of Galveston.

Some rascals turned looters. Citizen committees shot 'em down in the act, like marauding coyotes. Men were found whose pockets bulged with human fingers. The corpses being too swollen for the rings to come off.

The citizen committees didn't ask any questions. They pulled back a gun hammer and added one more to the 6000 dead.

Back in the land where those first Texas camels was brought from, the fierce tribal law has a grim penalty for a thief. The boss chief whacks off the thief's hand.

WHITE HAWSES

If stealing, by men or by governments run by racketeers with fancy uniforms and titles, could be abolished, most o' the woes o' the human race would come to a end. But it's sort o' hard to convince hard-tempered youngsters in our country that crime don't pay. When it goes unpunished, when committeed under some high-falutin' name.

It don't even help a whole lot to tell a wayward youngster that his conscience will punish him if the law don't. There's always plenty o' people willing to take chances with their conscience. Even if there ain't any salve that will heal it up for good.

Well, gals and galluses, I started out telling about camels and here I am preaching on rules o' upright conduct. I reckon the proper way to look at life is to be amazed and glad that there are so many honest folks, and generous ones.

It's generally so that the things you see and think about the most are the ones you'll bring into your own experience. Did you ever go along the road looking for white hawses? Once you get to looking for 'em, you'd be surprised how many there are, though you took no note of 'em before.

Yessir, we most always get what we're looking for. It was that way when wagons first tracked the Texas prairies. I never did see it fail that a troublesome cuss always found himself a fight. But many a fair-dealing, calm-tempered man lived out his days without a ruckus, even in them stirring times.

MEN FOUGHT

Men fought more in the early West, howsomever. No doubt o' that. That was about the only way they had o' settling private differences. There wasn't a policeman on every corner, and you had to assert your own rights when they got tromped on.

On the other hand, there was a heap more friendliness. In these days, as we whizz past each other on the road, and comment on the other gent under our breath if he does some little, thoughtless act, it don't seem possible that only a few years back, folks always stopped on the road when they met a traveller opposite-bound. Stopped and

BEST FUN, FICTION AND FOTOS IN

swapped pleasant talk, or gave each other help if in any kind of a jackpot.

It was customs like these that made living a contrasty procedure in the old West, and those contrasts, they was at their sharpest in Texas, when the Rangers rode. Reckon that's why Texas Ranger stories make such lively reading. The lights an' shadows don't need any painting. Nearly every Tejano's life was a dramatic experience, crammed with danger, hardship, comical happenings and continuous action. Life was sometimes a burden but it wasn't ever dull.

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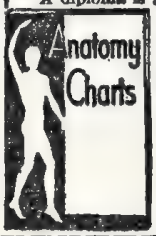

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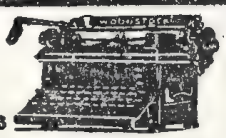

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State of New York } ss.
County of New York }

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and County aforesaid, personally appeared N. L. Pines, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Publisher of Texas Rangers, and that the following is to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

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3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of the total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none.

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N. L. PINES, Publisher.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 3rd day of October, 1938. Eugene Wechsler, Notary Public.

My commission expires March 30, 1939.

WEST OF THE PECOS

(Concluded from page 105)

what he had undertaken so rashly.

"My turn now, Ranger," she finally managed. "My turn to hand you a little jolt, though the Lord knows I intended to keep it from you."

"What are you getting at?" he demanded testily.

"Well, I lied just a little, myself," she giggled, "in order to get away from Pecos Gorge. It was a big comedown for me, working there, and I sure grabbed onto the chance to get away."

Every word she uttered jarred on Ranger Adams' nerves. He was growing more doubtful each minute whether he was doing Jack Morley a favor in persuading her to leave her renegade companions.

"Here's the truth, Ranger," she was saying. "I did a little fancy play-acting for you, back there, this afternoon. Oh, I know how. I played in stock at the Golden Gate Theater in San Francisco for two seasons. Till a little taffy-haired ingénue came along, understudied me, and went on one night when I was too drunk. She got my part."

"And you drifted to Owl's Hole, is that it? Don't bother about the rest of it, I'm not interested," he retorted.

"I've got an idea you're interested in this much of it," she informed him. "Jack Morley, he will be, too, because that little ingénue, she was a spittin' image of me, or what I had been."

Ranger Adams was sitting up stiff and straight, now. Even before she continued, he half-guessed what she was going to say.

"Her name's in lights, now, out in Frisco. Her name, it's—Katherine Morley."

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6.25-17		2.90	1.35
28x5.25-18		2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19		2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20		2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21		2.25	1.35
6.50-17		3.25	1.40
29x5.50-19		3.35	1.40
6.00-17		2.40	1.40
30x5.00-19		2.40	1.40
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Size	Tire	Tube
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32x4	2.95	1.25
33x4	2.95	1.25
34x4	2.95	1.25
32x4½	3.25	1.45

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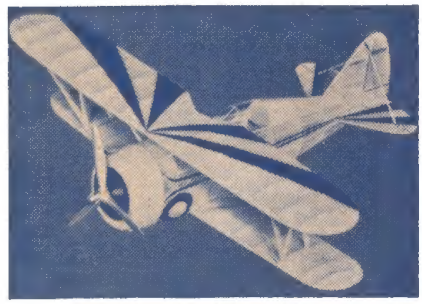

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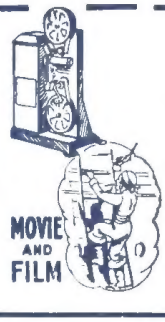

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